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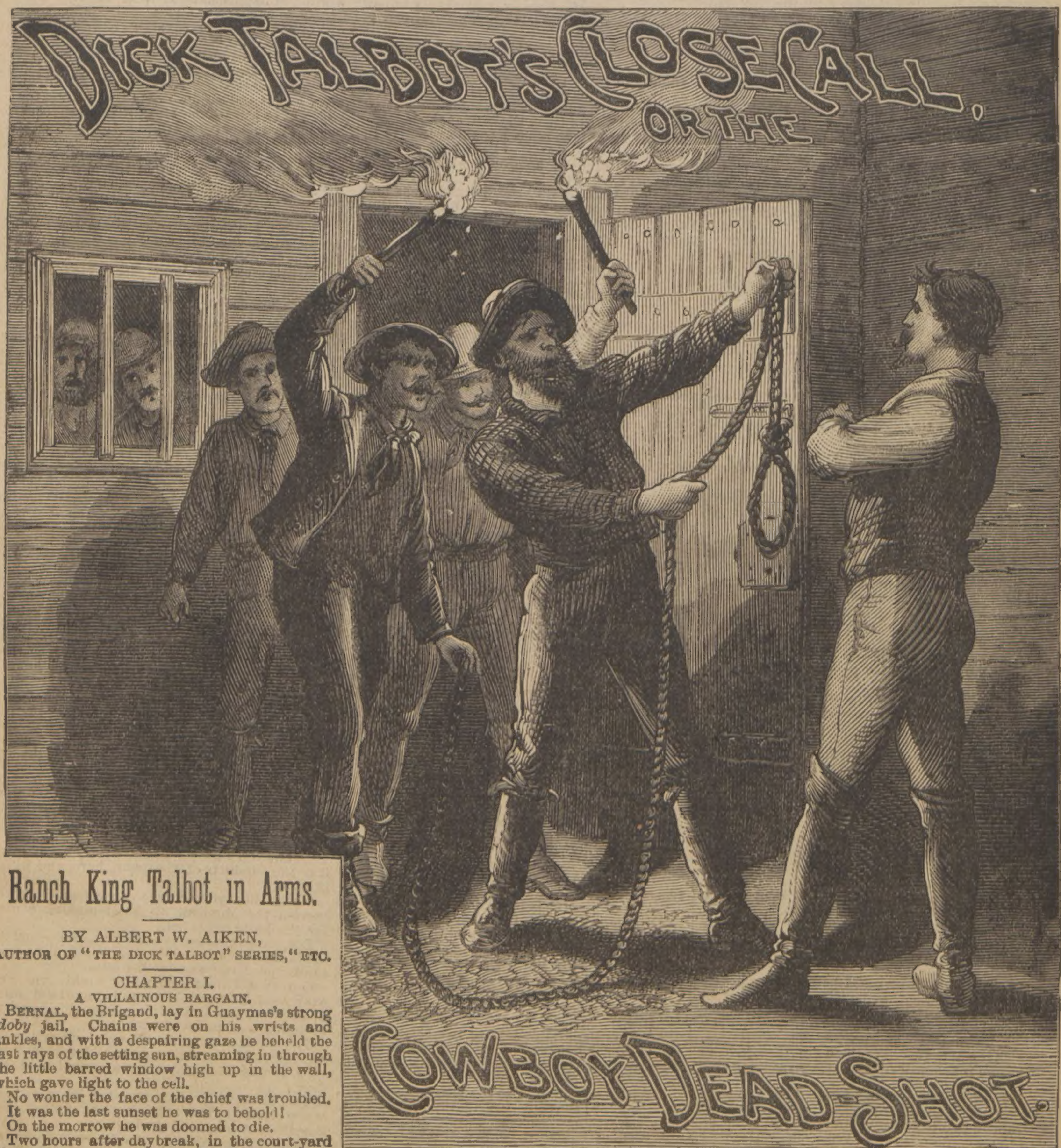
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Ranch King Talbot in Arms.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN,
AUTHOR OF "THE DICK TALBOT" SERIES, "ETC."

CHAPTER I.

A VILLAINOUS BARGAIN.

BERNAL, the Brigand, lay in Guaymas's strong 'doby jail. Chains were on his wrists and ankles, and with a despairing gaze he beheld the last rays of the setting sun, streaming in through the little barred window high up in the wall, which gave light to the cell.

No wonder the face of the chief was troubled.

It was the last sunset he was to behold!

On the morrow he was doomed to die.

Two hours after daybreak, in the court-yard of the jail, he was to face a file of Mexican soldiers, and their bullets would bring to an end

UNDAUNTEDLY DICK TALBOT FACED THE THREATENING MEN.

the career of the greatest marauder who ever flourished along the whole line of the frontier.

Then the Mexican hacendados of Sonora could breathe in peace;—the American ranchmen of Arizona need no longer watch their possessions, rifle in hand; the Hawks of Cababi had lost their bold leader, and the brigand band without the daring Fernando Bernal was like a body without a head.

"A few hours more of life and I will cross the dark river from whose silent shore no mortal returns," murmured the brigand, as he reclined upon his rude couch, and gazed at the sunbeams now flushing the gloom of the dungeon.

"To die like a rat in a trap—shot to death by a file of miserable louts, who would run like rabbits if they had to face me in the open field! And it is to this American Ranch King I owe my doom!"

At which thought the prisoner ground his teeth fiercely, and shook his fist in menace as though the man he hated was glaring at him from the gloom.

"Ah, Dick Talbot! Well for you the bullets of the soldiers will soon end my career, for I would have brought you to a bloody reckoning for the destruction of my band!"

The meditations of the condemned man were brought to an end by the grating of the huge key in the massive lock of the door. The door opened, and the jailer appeared, conducting two strangers.

They were well-dressed men, with full beards, and looked like Americans.

"There he is, señors!" remarked the jailer, "the biggest scoundrel that Sonora has ever known, but the leaden pills will settle his business for him to-morrow—pills warranted to cure all mortal ills!" and the official laughed heartily at his gruesome jest.

"Yes, gentlemen, I am the wild beast!" exclaimed Bernal, defiantly. "Gaze on me! Get the worth of your money, for I presume you have paid something for the enjoyment of this privilege!"

"Oh, yes; do you think I'd take the trouble for nothing?" the jailer demanded, with a leer.

"I hope our visit gives no offense," the foremost one of the strangers said, a tall, light-haired, blue-eyed man. "We came out of curiosity; happening to pass through Guaymas and hearing that the man who so long set all the power of the Government at defiance was caught at last, we thought we would pay you a visit. Is it against the rules, jailer, to offer the prisoner a drink of good brandy from my flask?" he continued, turning to the warder.

"On, no, provided there is enough to give the jailer a mouthful!" that worthy replied, with a grin.

"There is plenty for us all," the other assured.

Then the brandy was passed around; but, although a pint flask, it was soon drained, for the jailer was a man with a prodigious swallow, and when the liquor was gone lamented the short supply.

"I'm sorry there is no more," said the blue-eyed stranger. "I suppose you could not go and get the flask filled?"

And as he spoke he drew a five-dollar gold-piece from his pocket.

The prison-keeper's eyes sparkled.

"Give me the coin and I will attend to it, but I'll bring a bottle!" he cried. "That flask only holds a mouthful. It is nobody's business, you know, so long as we keep this matter to ourselves. The only thing is I shall have to lock you gents in while I am away."

The strangers assented to this, and the jailer departed.

"Now, Bernal, to business!" the blue-eyed visitor exclaimed, when satisfied that the jailer was out of hearing. "Do you wish to escape from this hole and the doom that awaits you?"

"Ay, a thousand times, yes!"

"You owe the plight you are in to Dick Talbot, the Ranch King of Arivaca?"

"Yes; a million curses upon him!"

"And if you were free you would be revenged upon him?"

"Yes; I would not rest until I had his heart's blood! But, first, I would like to make him undergo some of the tortures which I have suffered in this den of horrors. Two years have I lain here, in chains, cursing the hour which brought this American into Arizona."

"He is my foe, too! I hate him so bitterly that only his death will satisfy me!" the stranger added, impressively. "But I know I am no match for the man—"

"Aid me to escape, and I will take such vengeance upon him that he will rue the hour he provoked my hatred!" the brigand interrupted, his eyes glittering like those of an angered rat-ter.

"It is a bargain! I will aid you to gain your freedom if you will swear to rid Arizona of that human pest."

"I will do it! I swear by all I hold sacred!" at which the stranger produced a small parcel, wrapped in oiled silk.

"This contains saws and files," he announced; "tiny tools, such as burglars use, and warranted to cut through the toughest iron as though it was but wood."

"Thanks!" cried the brigand, as he joyfully seized the package and secreted it under the straw. "Now tell me how the guard without is placed."

"Only one man—a sentinel who keeps watch at the gate."

"I can easily scale the wall in the rear!"

"You will need money, of course?"

"Yes, for I haven't got a copper!" the brigand declared. "The rascals stripped me of everything after I was captured."

The stranger counted fifty dollars in five-dollar gold-pieces into Bernal's hand, and then gave him a small revolver and an eight-inch bowie-knife.

"There, now; you are provided with both money and weapons, and if you do not succeed in making your way to the mountains, where you will find secure refuge, you will have extremely bad luck."

"Don't, señors; I will be able to take care of myself once I am free from these chains and out of this accursed hole."

The grating of the key in the lock interrupted further conversation.

The jailer had returned with a bottle of the fiery mescal, the Mexican whisky. The party soon disposed of it; then the strangers departed.

"I hope I shall not be disturbed to-night, since it is to be my last on earth," the brigand remarked.

"Make your mind easy; no one will come near you," the jailer averred. "I will bring you your grub right away, and then you can rest in peace until the soldiers come for you in the morning."

The prisoner finished this with a good appetite and then went to work upon his chains.

Industriously he plied the saw and at last was free from the fetters. Then he began on the iron bars which guarded the windows.

He sawed two of them through at the bottom, and was thus able to wrench them away.

It was a close squeeze, but he managed to pass through the window. The doory wall in the rear was easily surmounted.

"At last I am free!" he exclaimed, as he hurried forward in the gloom. "And now, Dick Talbot, Ranch King of Arivaca, look well to yourself, for the avenger is on your track!"

CHAPTER II.

THE MAVERICK MAN.

It was early morning and the inhabitants of the little mining-camp of Silveropolis, situated in the southern foot-hills of the old Cababi mountain range, were just beginning to rouse themselves from their slumbers.

A busy, bustling little town was Silveropolis, for the mines were pausing out well, while, to the southward, were many large cattle-ranches, which procured all their supplies from the town, for the camp was full of go-ahead traders, and it did more business in a week than the sleepy old towns down by the Mexican line in a month.

The principal butcher of the place, Big Ben Perkins, as he was usually termed, was in his corral, engaged in conversation with a rough-looking fellow who had just brought in the carcass of a steer.

Michael Castillo, the man called himself, but he was seldom thus addressed, for, as Mexican Mike he was far better known.

Mexican Mike, the Maverick Man!

Maverick is the name applied to cattle without brands, which can be taken by the first man lucky enough to discover them.

And Mexican Mike, although he only had a small ranch, and could not boast of many beeves, yet sold a goodly number of carcasses to the butchers of the neighboring towns. He was a notorious Maverick-hunter, always on the lookout for the strays, and gossip said that, if he came across branded beeves he did not hesitate to appropriate them if the risk of getting caught was not too great.

The Maverick Man was rather undersized, but broad-shouldered and muscular, and bore the reputation of being an extremely ugly man in a row.

"Two cents a pound, hey?" said the butcher as he surveyed the carcass.

"That is my price. *Caramba!* is it not worth it? See! it is a noble animal!"

"Well, it is a fair beef, but I cannot go you two cents a pound on it!" the butcher replied.

"And why not? Is it not the going price?"

"Yes, but I reckon I wouldn't keer to give more'n a cent a pound for this hyar critter."

"Why is that? Why offer me but a half of what it is worth?" demanded the Mexican, angrily.

"Because I must have something for the risk I run."

"Risk?"

"Yes, risk! Didn't I have trouble 'bout the last critter I bought from you? No less than three ranchers were arter me, swearing that you had taken one of their cattle."

"Was it not proof that the men lied when all three claimed the same beast?" the Mexican demanded.

"Well, of course it could not have belonged to them all, but each man had missed cattle and all thought you were the fellow who had got them. They couldn't prove it, of course, for as

the hide was gone, no brand could be found," the butcher explained.

"They are a set of lying rascals!" cried the Maverick Man, angrily. "Because I am not rich and cannot boast of a fine ranch, these ranchers would like to drive me out of the country; they think there is no room here for a poor man, and so they lie about me!"

"Well, you know, Mike, you have got kinder a bad name on account of being mixed up with Fernando Bernal's band. You were one of the brigands, and the folks lay it up ag'in' you," Ben Perkins observed.

"Did I not do what was right in the end?" demanded Mike, in a sulky way. "I was young and foolish, and so was easily led away; and at last I saw my error and did all in my power to correct it."

"Yes, when the band was broken up you turned traitor to your comrades and helped to convict them, and so escaped punishment yourself," the butcher retorted. "It is an odd thing, Mike, but a good many people in these parts lay that up ag'in' you. They think it was mighty rough on you to go back on your comrades when they got into difficulties, and I have heard many a man predict that if Fernando Bernal ever escaped, and came back to this section, he would go for your scalp the first thing."

"Bah!" cried Mexican Mike, contemptuously, "what care I for their idle chatter? And as for Bernal, he was shot to death a week ago at Guaymas, and by this time he is food for worms. I happened to know of this, for I left Guaymas the day before the one on which he was to die, and all preparations had been made for his execution."

"Yes, I heard he had been shot, but we never hear much from Guaymas up this way," Ben Perkins remarked. "But to come back to business: a cent and a half is all I will give, for I have got to have something to pay me in case any mad rancher comes raging round hyer and swears it is his critter."

"Ah, you ought not to take advantage of a man's bad name!" protested the Mexican, angrily. "But I need the money, and so will take your offer. Count me out the cash and I will be off!"

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the appearance of two horsemen, who rode into the corral.

The first was a well-built, muscular man, with piercing gray-blue eyes, brown-black hair, regular, handsome features, and a soldierly appearance.

He wore a dark suit of corduroy, high riding-boots, no vest, and his broad chest was covered with a ruffled shirt, in the bosom of which shone a costly diamond pin.

Rare articles are "billed" shirts in the wilds of Arizona, where the average man seldom wears anything but flannel, and usually very dirty flannel it is.

This was Dick Talbot, the Ranch King of Arizona.

His companion was an Indian—a brawny brave, attired in the prairie garb of buckskin, but sporting on his massive head a battered silk hat.

Those who know Dick Talbot and his friends—the men who have aided him in many a desperate adventure—will, in this dusky red-man, recognize the Blackfoot chief, Mud Turtle.

Mexican Mike scowled as the Ranch King rode into the inclosure, and the butcher appeared ill at ease.

He had been satisfied, from the beginning, that the odds were big the Maverick Man had not come honestly by the beef; hence, the moment Talbot appeared, Perkins suspected he had come to lay claim to the carcass.

The Ranch King dismounted, and, advancing to where the beef was deposited, gazed at it for a moment, then fixed his keen eyes on Mexican Mike.

"You worked this job pretty well," he remarked, "but, cunning as you are, you could not hide your trail from such a tracker as my red-skin yonder; so I have been able to follow you without difficulty."

"What do you mean?" demanded the Maverick Man, angrily.

"That you stole this beef from my herd, drove it to the outskirts of the camp, here, and killed it."

"You lie, you cursed American!" fairly howled the Mexican, his hand making a dive for the knife in his belt.

But, just as he got it out—just as the bright blade flashed in the sunbeams—quick as he was, the Ranch King was quicker still.

Out shot Talbot's muscular right arm, and over went Maverick Mike, felled by the tremendous blow, the knife flying from his hand as though it was endowed with wings.

The ruffian was game, though, and struggled to his feet at once, but only to be knocked down by a second blow, even more violent than the first.

The second stroke moderated his rage, and when he slowly rose to his feet he manifested no intention of renewing the battle.

By this time half-a-dozen citizens had congregated at the corral gate, attracted by the fight, and in eager curiosity gazed upon the scene.

"For the present I have had enough, but I will some day call you to a bloody reckoning for this!" the Mexican hissed, in his fierce rage.

"I shall be ready for you at any time!" was Talbot's assurance. "And now, let me give you a warning, Mexican Mike: in the future let my cattle alone. This is not the first beef belonging to my herd you have taken, and though I should hate to take the life of a man for a steer, yet I must protect myself. You have had fair warning, so look out! And you, Ben Perkins," he continued, addressing the butcher, "you will get into trouble if you buy from rascals like this Maverick Man, without being sure that the cattle are not stolen."

Now, though the butcher was a turbulent fellow, and seldom took any "talk" from any one, yet on this occasion he was rather awed, and so did not reply with his usual insolence.

"I give you my word, Mr. Talbot, I wasn't going to buy the critter until I was sure it was all right," he protested.

"I hope so; I only wanted to caution you. This steer is mine, but as it is dead, you can cut it up and give it away to the poor of the town."

"Bully for you, Mister Talbot!" cried one of the bystanders.

There was a cheer; the Ranch King mounted and rode away with the Indian, leaving two very angry men behind.

Two more enemies had Richard Talbot made!

CHAPTER III.

THE GAMBLER'S DAUGHTER.

ON the one street which the mining-camp of Silveropolis boasted, about in the center of the town, was a good-sized, two-storied building, the lower floor occupied by a saloon which displayed a sign announcing that it was "The City of Mexico Hotel."

This place was kept by a real old Spanish Don, as the miners were wont to term him, an aged gentleman with iron-gray hair and a famous long beard of the same hue.

Despite the name, the place was merely a gaming-saloon with a bar attached.

Spanish monte was the one game provided for the amusement of patrons, and the owner, Don Pedro Santander, as he was called, presided at the table with all the dignity and grace of a gentleman of the old Castilian school.

The saloon was a popular one, notwithstanding only one game was played, but it was believed that everything was run "on the square," and the gamblers thus had a fair show for their money.

The Don lived over the saloon, a widower, but with as fair a daughter as all Arizona could boast.

She was a true Spanish beauty, with jet-black eyes and hair, and the creamy-hued skin common to the daughters of Castile.

Guadalupe she was called, and there was no girl in the town, or, indeed, in the country for leagues around, who could compare with her.

In the Wild West no particular disgrace attaches to a man because he keeps a gaming-saloon, provided everything is honestly conducted; therefore the old Don was considered one of the leading citizens of Silveropolis.

Few young men were there in the camp, or old ones either, for that matter, who would not have been glad to win a smile from the peerless maid; but she was proud, this Guadalupe, although only a gambler's daughter, and kept all wooers at a distance.

The most persistent of all who admired the charms of this fair young girl was one of the proprietors of the leading saloon in the town, known as the Cowboy's Ranch.

Jefferson Clairborne, he was named, and prided himself upon being a high-toned gentleman. He was a good-looking man of thirty-five, or thereabouts, with sandy hair and a tawny beard.

George Oglethorpe, his partner, was like himself, a Southerner, hailing from Georgia, but he was far from being like the polished gentleman from Alabama, which State Clairborne came from.

On the afternoon of the day on the morning of which the incident described in our last chapter occurred Clairborne called upon Miss Guadalupe.

The old Don and the sport were good friends, and so Clairborne was usually well-received by the girl.

On this occasion, though, he found Guadalupe inclined to be reserved, and with that strange blindness, so common to men in love, Clairborne determined to question the girl in regard to her feelings toward him.

"Miss Guadalupe, do you know that you are looking more beautiful than ever to-day?" he began, abruptly.

"You are pleased to be complimentary," she returned, lightly.

"Oh, no; it is the truth, believe me! Happy will be the man who wins such a charming girl as yourself!"

Guadalupe shook her head, and the expression upon her face showed that the subject was distasteful to her.

"Your words are too flattering to be honest," she remarked. "And I beg you will cease. Many girls would be pleased to be so compli-

mented, but I am not one of that kind. I do not care for suitors, and it will be many years, I trust, before I leave my father."

"Then you will not allow me to hope that my earnest suit will one day find favor in your eyes?"

"I feel flattered, of course; it is natural for a girl to be pleased when she is admired; but I have no thoughts of marrying, and, you will pardon me for saying it, I trust, but the business you follow is not one which I should wish my husband to be engaged in."

A frown gathered upon the face of Clairborne.

"Why, your father is in the same line. The only difference is that I make four or five times as much out of it as he does."

"Yes; but you must remember that my father was not always as he is now," the girl replied. "I can remember the time when we had a beautiful home and my father was a rich man; then the demon of play took possession of him and he lost all, until finally he became a gambler himself. But this life will not last always; some day we will go far from here and strive to forget how the new fortune was made."

"There is no hope for me, then?"

"None; I am sorry to say it, but in such a matter the truth must be told," the girl answered, firmly.

The gambler bit his lip and was silent for a moment; then, with an effort to appear unconcerned, he said:

"Well, I am sorry that things are so. I had hoped that my devotion would have touched your cold heart. By the way, did you hear of the trouble this morning between Mexican Mike, the Maverick Man, and this Ranch King, Dick Talbot?"

A faint flush appeared in the girl's face, which the gambler, watching her with the eyes of a hawk, was quick to perceive.

"Yes, I heard of it."

"This Talbot is a noble fellow!" Clairborne averred, but there was a sneer in the speech which belied the words.

"I do not know much about him," the girl answered, evasively.

"Oh, don't you? Why, I thought you were great friends!" the gambler exclaimed.

"No, we are not—mere acquaintances."

"Quite romantic, I understand, the way in which you became acquainted with him."

"Well, hardly that; my rein parted when I was out riding one day, my horse took fright, ran away, and Mr. Talbot happened luckily to be near at hand—"

"And so rescued you from your peril. It is the old story, you know; I have read it a hundred times; and of course you have lost your heart to the noble gentleman who rescued you; now, in regular sequence, you ought to marry the Ranch King; and I don't doubt you would gladly do so, only he happens, unluckily for you, to have a wife, so that spoils your little game."

The girl's face became scarlet.

"Mr. Clairborne, I do not like the tone in which you speak!" Guadalupe exclaimed, rising indignantly. "Mr. Talbot is nothing to me nor I to him. He did me a service once, but that is no reason why I should fall in love with him; and I am acquainted with his wife, too, who is a perfect lady; you have wounded me by your words, and I trust you will excuse me."

And then she left the room.

"I have done it now!" exclaimed the gambler, seizing his hat and departing. "But I couldn't help speaking, for I know it is the truth, for until Talbot and she became acquainted she was rather inclined to favor my suit."

CHAPTER IV.

THE PARTNERS.

CLAIRBORNE went directly to his saloon, where he found his partner, burly George Oglethorpe, smoking a cigar.

At this time of day there was little business done, for, like all mining towns, the camp was almost deserted during the day.

"You look out of sorts," Oglethorpe remarked.

"Good reason for it," and then the other related what had transpired.

"What on earth did you want to bother the girl for, when you saw she was not inclined to be sociable?"

"Well, I was a fool to do it, of course," Clairborne admitted. "But men are doing such foolish things all the time."

"Do you think there is a love affair between her and Talbot?"

"Oh, no, but the girl has got a romantic notion in her head that Talbot is a sort of a hero. I don't suppose she would be willing to admit to herself that she has fallen in love with him, seeing that he is a married man, and there isn't any chance for her while his wife lives; but while she has this notion she is not likely to look with favor upon any other man. It is that sort of a feeling, you know, that makes a girl go off and turn nun," the gambler explained.

"Yes, I understand; and your cake is all dough until she gets the romantic notion out of her head?"

"I am afraid so."

"Well, now, if I were you, I should be inclined to 'go' for this Ranch King!" Oglethorpe remarked. "Maybe if you could succeed in cutting his comb, the girl would think you were a bigger hero than he, and cotton to you right away."

"Yes, that idea occurred to me."

"I reckon we owe this Ranch King a dig, anyway."

"How so?" Clairborne asked.

"Well, I hear—from pretty good authority, too—that he let on the other night in the Silver Ship that we did not play as square a game here as we might."

"Is that so?" Clairborne asked, his face darkening.

"So I was told, and you know if that impression gets abroad, it will be good-by to our business here."

"I should not be surprised if he did say it," Clairborne observed. "I noticed him watching the game closely the other night when you tried the 'brace' on that big fellow who was winning so steadily. I was afraid then that he had tumbled to it."

"I had to do it!" Oglethorpe exclaimed. "The galoot was playing in big luck, and if I hadn't rung in the brace on him, the chances are great he would have cleaned us out."

"Yes, I understand; of course it had to be done; we could not afford to let the fellow carry off all our cash; but if Talbot has commenced to shoot off his mouth about it, he must be stopped."

"It will be no easy matter," Oglethorpe observed. "The fellow is game and a good fighter. They say that he cleaned out Mexican Mike this morning in no time, and the Mexican, you know, has the reputation of being a pretty bad man."

"There never was a Mexican yet that was worth his salt in a fist fight!" Clairborne declared.

"That is a fact!" the other admitted. "They are no bruisers."

"And this Ranch King is, from all accounts."

"You don't think of trying him in that way?"

"Not much!" Clairborne exclaimed. "That isn't my gait either. I shall take an early opportunity to get a crack at him in a gentlemanly way."

"Well, I propose to climb him myself, but I don't want any dull business. I'll get a chance at him in some saloon, and then the quickest man with his gun will be the big chief," Oglethorpe observed.

"Go ahead any way you like! The one point is, he must be settled."

"Correct!"

"Shake on it!"

And the two sports clasped hands.

CHAPTER V.

A CRY IN THE NIGHT.

DARKNESS had descended upon the mining-camp. It was after nine, and all the business-places in Silveropolis were in full blast.

The affray between Mike and Talbot had created great talk.

Both of the men had remained in town, and as the Maverick Man had filled himself full of liquor, and then began to "blow" about what he was going to do to Talbot when he met him—"knife him, fill him full of holes," and a lot of other interesting operations, the town was on the alert for a fight.

Dick Talbot had remained in town on account of some cattle business, but the party whom he had expected in the afternoon had sent word he could not come until evening, and so the Ranch King waited for him, making his headquarters at the Silver Ship, and, to pass away the time, had joined a little poker game in the back room in the rear of the saloon, and when the man for whom he waited came he sought the Ranch King in the poker-room, and the business was transacted there.

There were quite a number in Silveropolis who were anxious to see a fight between the Maverick Man and the Ranch King, and they took pains to find out where Talbot was and carry the news to the Mexican.

But, despite his loud vaunts, the Maverick Man showed no disposition to seek the man who, he declared, he was going to kill "on sight."

Then some of these same busybodies sought Talbot and repeated to him the threats that the Mexican had made, hoping to excite him to seek out the other, but the Ranch King only laughed.

"Threatened men live long," he remarked. "If the Maverick Man is anxious to see me, he will not have any difficulty in discovering my whereabouts. I am ready to give him all the satisfaction he can possibly desire, whenever he comes to claim it."

Midnight approached; the poker party broke up and the Ranch King rode off homeward.

About half an hour after he departed, just as the saloons were beginning to thin out, there rung out a loud shriek through the stillness of the night which, for the moment, almost froze the blood of all those who heard it, so full of horror was the cry.

Play had ended in the saloons, and, in the majority of them, the customers were taking a parting drink, a "night-cap," as more than one jovial soul termed it, but when the cry of human agony pealed forth on the air, the glasses were hastily emptied and all, who heard the cry, rushed out into the night.

Down the street, just about half-way between the Cowboy's Ranch and a low Mexican "dive," known as the Hotel de Sonora, lay a man, face downward, groaning in terrible agony.

And as the crowd hurried to the scene they were horrified at beholding a bowie-knife handle sticking from his back, between his shoulders, plunged into the body up to the hilt.

Jefferson Clairborne, who, with his partner, was one of the first to arrive at the scene of the tragedy, removed the knife, and aided by the others, turned the man so his face could be seen.

The moon was high in the heavens, so that all objects were distinctly visible, and a great shout of surprise came from the crowd when they looked upon the face of the stricken man.

It was Mexican Mike!

Plain was it to all that the blow had been a fatal one, and that the Maverick Man was now struggling in the agonies of death.

"In Heaven's name who has done this deed?" Clairborne cried.

"The coward—he struck me in the back—" the wounded man gasped.

"Yes, but who—who?" Ogleshorpe cried.

"Yes, who?" the crowd repeated.

"If he had only given me a chance—I could have killed him—I never was afraid to meet him—I am his match, I—"

A few convulsive gasps and the soul of Mexican Mike, the Maverick Man, had fled.

For a moment the members of the crowd gazed at each other in horror; rough, bearded men were they, rude in speech, gifted with but little refinement, yet this awful death terrified them into the gentleness of children.

Who was the assassin? The thought was running in each mind, for that Mexican Mike had been assassinated, stricken from behind, without being given a chance for his life, was apparent.

The position of the wound, which had sapped his life away, amply proved that, even if he had not been able to speak.

But Mike's words seemed clearly to point to one party, and there was hardly a man in the crowd who was not sure he could name the doer of the deed.

Clairborne held up the knife.

"Whose knife is this? Does anybody recognize it?" he asked.

"Shiver my timbers!" cried Skipper Bill, "but I reckon that is Dick Talbot's knife!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE ARREST.

A LONG breath came from the lips of the bystanders.

The name was spoken at last—the name which was on every tongue, for under the circumstances it seemed sure that the Ranch King was the man who had done the deed.

In the excitement of the moment the crowd did not stop to calculate that Dick Talbot was not a man likely to stop to play the part of an assassin.

He and the dead man had quarreled—they were enemies, and the words too of the dying Mexican seemed to clearly point to the Ranch King.

"Say, gentlemen, we don't want to make any mistake about this matter," Clairborne declared, earnestly.

His joy was great, for he thought the chance of fortune had given up the Ranch King to destruction, but he concealed it well, and proceeded to make the net, which was beginning to tighten around the man he hated, as strong as possible.

"I reckon thar ain't ary bit of a mistake!" Skipper Bill declared. "That 'ar knife is just like the one that I hev seen in Talbot's belt; still it may not be his'n for all that, though it ain't a common kind of a knife."

A half-dozen of the crowd made a careful examination of the weapon, and then one and all declared that if it was not Talbot's knife it was exactly like the one which he carried.

"Well, gentlemen, I reckon this is a mighty serious matter," Clairborne observed, after the members of the crowd had delivered their opinions. "This seems to have been the foulest kind of a murder. The man who owned this knife came up behind the Maverick Man and struck him down without giving him a chance for his life; his dying words prove that, and though I hate to say it, for I have a high respect for Mr. Talbot, yet Mike's declarations seem to point directly to him as the man who did the job."

"Let's git hosses an' go arter him!" cried one of the crowd.

The speaker was a cowboy who had formerly been in the Ranch King's service and had been discharged for drunkenness; therefore he bore no love to Dick Talbot.

"Yes, yes; that's the talk!" cried another of the crowd.

"Git hosses, git hosses!" chorused a dozen voices.

"Hello! what's the matter?" asked a rather undersized, fat, gray-bearded man, as he pushed his way through the crowd.

And then there was a general cry of:

"Hello, Doc!"

It was the medical man of the camp, Doctor Solon Brown, a gentleman who was a pretty good doctor when he was not so deeply steeped in liquor as to be unable to act, which was an almost daily occurrence.

As it happened, the doctor was all right, and, when he learned what had happened, proceeded to examine the stricken man, for some of the bystanders had suggested that Mike had only fainted.

"Oh, no; his hash is settled," the doctor declared, in his cold, professional way. "This hyer lick is big enough and deep enough to let out the life of a dozen men."

At this point the town marshal of Silveropolis appeared upon the scene, a big, brawny, red-haired, red-bearded fellow, John Livingstone by name.

He had been made town marshal on the theory of set a rogue to catch a rogue, for, previous to his appointment, he bore the reputation of being as bad a man as there was in the town.

He was quickly apprised of the murder and the suspicions which had arisen.

A good look he took at the knife.

"You are right, boys, for a thousand ducats!" he cried, in his rough way. "This hyer is Talbot's toad-sticker! I reckon I have seen it in his belt a hundred times."

"Let's go for him!" cried the cowboy who had before spoken.

"That's the talk! Hosses and w'epons, boys!" the marshal cried. "Inside of ten minutes we'll take wing!"

The crowd dispersed in a twinkling, a couple only remaining with the doctor to attend to the body.

The camp could boast of a goodly number of horses, for a pony could be had for ten or fifteen dollars, and within the time specified by the marshal, a dozen men were mounted and ready for the start.

All were armed, and the majority carried rifles, for the hunters, who embarked thus eagerly on a man-chase had an idea that the Ranch King might show fight, and although apart from his quarrel with the Maverick Man that morning, the town knew nothing of his abilities as a warrior, yet the impression was abroad that he could make a desperate fight if the notion seized him.

Out from the town the party rode, the marshal in the advance, with a Winchester rifle in the hollow of his arm.

"We will have him, boys, or have his hide!" the red-bearded ruffian declared, boastfully.

The posse pushed on at a good pace, but as Talbot had nearly half an hour's start, none of the party believed he would be overtaken before he reached his ranch.

As it happened, though, fortune favored the pursuers, for the Ranch King was detained on his homeward road.

He had not proceeded more than a mile when he discovered that his saddle was loose.

Dismounting to examine as to the cause, he was astonished to discover that the "cinch" had given way, and upon looking carefully he was forced to the conclusion that it had been cut nearly through, so that the strain would cause it to part in time.

The Ranch King was puzzled.

"Now, what does this mean?" he exclaimed.

"What idiot tampered with my saddle? Is it a practical joke, perpetrated with the hope of giving me a tumble? Upon my word! I would give a trifle to be within arm's length of the man who did it. I would be apt to warm his ears in a way certain to keep him from playing any practical jokes for one while."

Dick Talbot was too old a traveler not to be able to repair the damage after a fashion, but the accident delayed him some twenty minutes, and then when he again proceeded he did not hurry himself, so he had not got over more than half his homeward road before the posse from the town caught sight of him.

The clatter of hoofs in his rear attracted Talbot's attention, but when he turned his head and recognized the town marshal at the head of the party, although he saw the moonbeams playing upon the rifles carried by the horsemen, yet he had no thought of danger to himself, and therefore neither quickened his pace nor made any effort to escape.

The marshal rode up alongside of Dick Talbot. "How are ye?" said Livingstone, in the most friendly manner.

The Ranch King returned the salutation.

"Lend me your knife a moment, will you?" quoth the marshal.

"Certainly!" and Talbot reached for his knife. "Hallo!" he exclaimed, "it is gone! I must have lost it on the road."

"Is this it?" said the marshal, showing a knife.

"Yes."

"Dick Talbot, you are my prisoner!" the marshal cried.

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE CALABOOSE.

THE marshal had ridden up on the right hand of the Ranch King and had his revolver all ready cocked for action, but the weapon was hidden by the body of his horse; the knife he held in his left hand, which grasped the reins of his steed, but until he displayed the weapon with the question as to its ownership, he concealed it by pressing it up against the inner side of his arm.

But as he uttered the words, "my prisoner," up came the revolver, and he leveled it full at Talbot.

At the same moment every man in the party leveled a firearm at the Ranch King.

"Don't attempt to show fight, or run!" cautioned Livingstone. "We have got the drop on you in the worst kind of way, and we will plug you for keeps if you ain't keerful!"

A dark look came over Talbot's face, and there was a glint of fire in his dark eyes.

All of the party had come to a halt.

The Ranch King looked around him; for a moment the wild idea of offering resistance came into his mind, but when he saw how completely he was surrounded, he banished it.

"Throw up your hands while we git your w'epons, Mr. Talbot," the marshal commanded. "Sorry to trouble you for 'em, but you are too good a man for us to take any chances with!"

"Well, under the circumstances, I reckon I will have to oblige you," and up went the Ranch King's hands. "But I say, gentlemen, isn't there some mistake about this matter? I have not done anything that I am aware of to warrant an arrest."

The marshal carefully removed Talbot's weapons, but, diligent as he was in the search, he failed to discover the small revolver which Talbot always carried in the secret pocket on the inner side of his shirt, under his flowing neck-handkerchief.

"Oh, I reckon, Talbot, that you know mighty well what we want you for!" the marshal exclaimed, after he had secured the weapons. "The fact that we have got your knife ought to show you that we have got you foul; you are in a tight place and no mistake!"

"Well, I am puzzled to know how the loss of my knife can cause my arrest; I suppose it dropped out of the sheath at the hotel, though I don't understand how such an accident could have happened."

"Neither do I," responded the officer, dryly.

"Right about face, and back to Silveropolis we go."

"Of what crime am I accused?" asked the Ranch King, as the return march was taken up.

"Oh, you know well enuff!" the marshal retorted. "Don't go to try and play the innocent dodge on us when there is sich overwhelming proof against you."

"What proof? What crime have I committed?"

But the marshal did not give the prisoner any satisfaction.

The matter had been discussed during the pursuit, and the conclusion had been reached that it would not be wise to allow the Ranch King to know the full extent of the accusation brought against him, although, if the party had carefully reflected upon the matter, they might have known that if Dick Talbot had committed the murder, the moment his knife was produced he would understand the nature of the charge, for that he was guilty none doubted.

The party hoped, too, that by keeping silent the prisoner might by some uncautious observation help to tighten the noose around his neck.

But when the Ranch King found that none of the party were disposed to give him the information he sought he relapsed into silence.

Although it was after one o'clock when the party arrived at Silveropolis, the town was wide awake to receive them. The terrible tragedy had banished sleep from the eyes of the inhabitants for awhile.

The mayor was at the calaboose, waiting for the arrival of the prisoner, for no one doubted that the marshal would be as good as his word when he declared before leaving the town that he would "fetch Dick Talbot alive or dead!"

Nathan Plunkett was mayor of the town in which he was the principal storekeeper; a Jew, his enemies declared, an Englishman he said, although his features were decidedly of Jewish cast.

He was a busy, hustling man, who had the habit of always greeting everybody, no matter if an utter stranger, as though he was the dearest friend he had in the world.

"Aha, this is a very bad business, Mr. Talbot!" he exclaimed, when the marshal conducted the prisoner into the calaboose.

"Well, I presume it is by the trouble that has been taken to bring me here," the Ranch King rejoined. "But at present I am hardly qualified to give an opinion, for I have no notion of what has occurred."

"Didn't you tell Mr. Talbot?" the mayor inquired of the marshal in surprise.

"We reckoned he would find it out soon enuff."

"He might as well know," the official said. "Mexican Mike was killed to-night, right in the street, stabbed in the back, and as your knife was found sticking in the wound, you are believed to be the man who did the deed."

Dick Talbot was an old-stager, and had been through many strange adventures in his time and therefore was not a man easily surprised, but on this occasion the unexpected charge rather disconcerted him.

He saw in a moment, too, that he had been caught in a trap. His knife had been stolen from his belt—not a difficult feat to accomplish, for just before departing he had spent ten or fifteen minutes in the crowded saloon, and had taken a couple of farewell glasses of ale with his poker-game companions, and while thus occupied an expert hand might have got his knife—then with the knife the murder had been committed, and the weapon left in the wound so as to fix the crime upon him; his cinch, too, had been cut so as to detain him on his homeward road.

Dick Talbot's face grew grave, for he fully comprehended that he was in a tight place.

"Well, Mr. Mayor, I am going to tell you the truth about the matter," he said. "I am innocent of this crime. I thrashed the Maverick Man in the morning for stealing my cattle and warned him that if he did not stop more severe punishment awaited him; that is rancher's law, you know, but as to stealing behind the man's back and killing him like a hired assassin—that is a Mexican trick and one that I would not be guilty of under any circumstances."

"Well, I trust you will be able to show this, Mr. Talbot," the mayor said. "I am sure no one regrets this unfortunate circumstance more than I do. This Mexican Mike was a bad egg. I am outten dollars by his death, as I was fool enough to let him have goods to that amount a few days ago; but I assure you I shall not lay that up against you, although if Mike hadn't been cut off, in time I would probably have got my money. You shall have the fairest kind of a trial. I will call a jury to-morrow, so that twelve men will decide the matter. We don't go much on law in Silveropolis, but we are death on justice."

And with this assurance the Ranch King was locked in the strong-room of the calaboose.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE TRIAL.

WITH the rising of the next day's sun people began to flock into Silveropolis; so great was the excitement aroused by the murder and the coming trial that business was almost suspended, just as if it had been a holiday.

The mayor was puzzled for some time about how to get the jury of twelve men to try the case.

He did not want to appoint them, for in that event, whether the trial went for or against the prisoner, he would be pretty sure to be accused of showing partiality.

The mayor consulted with the prominent citizens of the town in regard to the matter, and finally the conclusion was reached to select the jurors by vote.

This decision pleased the citizens immensely, and candidates were at once nominated.

Clairborne began to pull wires immediately, and, as a result, himself and Oglethorpe were named.

Don Santander was another candidate, and as soon as the gambler learned this fact he set to work to do all in his power to have the Don beaten, for he had a suspicion that Santander had been induced to run by the solicitations of his daughter, and he feared that if the Don was one of the jury he would hesitate to bring in a verdict of guilty, influenced by Guadalupe.

Perkins, the butcher, had also been nominated. He would have declined to run on account of being able to bear witness in regard to the quarrel between the Ranch King and the Maverick Man in the morning, but luckily his assistant witnessed the affair from beginning to end, standing at the gate of the corral, and so Perkins was able to run.

He wanted to get on the jury, for he bore Talbot a grudge, and here was an opportunity to get even.

Kipper Bill of the Silver Ship was also a candidate, and against him too the gamblers exerted all their power.

They were afraid that the rough old sailor would favor the prisoner.

The election came off about noon, and as the Ranch King had no suspicions that any attempt would be made to pack the jury and so did not warn his friends to be on the lookout, the gamblers succeeded in their plans.

Santander and Skipper Bill were defeated, Clairborne, Oglethorpe and Perkins elected, together with nine other townsmen, all tolerably fair average men.

Particular pains were taken by the voters that no ranchmen, cowboys or Mexicans should be on the jury.

The townsmen declared that the prisoner should have the squarest kind of a deal, and that neither friends or enemies should have a say in regard to his life.

While these arrangements were being made,

the Ranch King was having an interview with his wife, who had come in haste.

Mrs. Talbot was the 'Frisco Nell of other days, and the lapse of time had taken from her none of her beauty, although she was a little more matronly now than when she ran the famous Golden Hairpin Saloon.

"I am in a trap," the Ranch King said, and then he explained to his wife all that had happened to make him come to that conclusion.

"But who is the author of this work?" she asked, in amazement.

"That is a mystery the solution of which is beyond me. I have puzzled over the matter, and I am utterly in the dark. There is not a soul in the town who has any reason to strike at my life, but you can see for yourself that this is a most cunningly arranged trap, and from the way things look now, I am afraid that it is going to be a difficult matter for me to get out of it."

"Surely you will not be convicted on such flimsy evidence?" Nell exclaimed.

"I don't know about that," Talbot replied, with a grave shake of the head. "To the average man the evidence may appear to be very strong, but we will have to wait until the trial to decide."

"Suppose it goes against you?" the wife exclaimed, in a tone full of anxiety.

"If I am convicted I shall beg for a few days' delay in the execution of the sentence, so as to arrange my affairs. It is almost certain that my request will be granted; that will give you time to organize my friends, for although the townsmen may be bitter against me if they believe I am guilty, yet the ranchers, even if they were certain I killed the Mexican, would consider it an outrage to hang me for such a thing, for, according to our ranch laws, the fellow ought to have been killed long ago, for he has been a cattle-thief for some time, although he has been smart enough to avoid being caught red-handed. I am certain that with our own men, who can be trusted, you can get together a force large enough to accomplish the purpose which I have in view in case I am convicted."

Mrs. Talbot did not ask her husband to explain.

She knew that he had some well-defined plan in view, and that knowledge satisfied her.

At two o'clock the trial began.

It was held in the open air, for there was no room in the camp big enough to hold a quarter of the people.

The mayor presided.

He opened the proceedings with a brief speech.

"Gentlemen of Silveropolis," he said, "this trial will not be conducted according to the usual rules of courts, because we haven't got any of that sort of machinery up in this region, but if we haven't got much law we will supply the place with lots of justice, and I reckon that no one will have any cause to complain. As there is no prosecuting attorney I will examine the witnesses who come forward to testify against the prisoner, and I shall do my best to get at the truth, whether it is in favor of the prisoner or against him, and although Mr. Talbot has no lawyer to defend him, yet, as he has a tongue in his head, I reckon he ought to be able to look out for himself. I reckon I would if I was situated as he is. Now, then, fire away!"

Clairborne got upon his feet—the jury were provided with seats, formed by a board placed upon some soap-boxes. The mayor had a chair on a dry-goods box.

"Mr. Mayor, the jury has chosen me as their foreman, and I rise to remark that we all declare we are going to give the prisoner the squarest kind of a deal. By rights, I suppose I ought to be a witness, as I was one of the first men on the ground, and pulled the knife out of the wound in Mexican Mike's back, but as there were four or five more who were right alongside of me, and saw the whole thing, their testimony will be just as good as mine. That is all, Mr. Mayor," and the gambler took his seat.

"Witnesses, step this way," said the mayor.

A half-dozen advanced.

"Were you all in the same crowd?"

"Yes," cried the men in a breath.

"Well then there isn't any use of taking up time by examining six of you when one will answer," the mayor declared.

"Suppose you step forward, Dan Dutton, and speak for the rest."

The miner addressed came forward with a grin.

He was a big, hulking fellow, known as Black Dan Dutton, from his shaggy hair and beard and dark complexion.

The mayor had a Bible and administered the oath to the man.

"Now, Mr. Dutton, pitch in and tell us what you know about this affair."

"Wa-al, shall I tell 'bout the morning or the night first?" the miner asked.

"Ah, you were present on both occasions?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that's lucky, for you can describe both affairs, and suppose, Mr. Dutton, that you commence with the morning fuss."

Then the man proceeded to relate how, early in the morning as he was going to his work, he

saw Talbot and the Indian ride into the butcher's corral, and gave an account of what happened.

This finished, he described how he, with the others, found Mexican Mike dying about midnight.

"Is this all straight, gentlemen? any witness see any more than Mr. Dutton has described, and is there anything wrong about his testimony?"

The men who had been present on the two occasions looked at each other, and then shook their heads.

Dutton had given a pretty exact account of all that had taken place.

"Do you want to ask the witness any questions, Mr. Talbot?" the mayor questioned.

"Only one," the Ranch King replied. "After I had thrashed Mexican Mike, did you hear me make any threat to him, except to say that if he did not leave my cattle alone he would get into trouble?"

"Nary time; that is all you said."

"The point I am trying to get at Mr. Mayor," the Ranch King explained, "is that I did not make any threats. I had whipped the man, then gave him a warning as to what he might expect if he did not quit stealing cattle."

The next witness was the marshal, who related how he had pursued and captured Talbot, the Ranch King admitting that the bowie-knife was his the moment he set eyes on it.

"Did I manifest any fear, or any idea of escaping, or act in any other way as a guilty man might be supposed to act?" Talbot asked.

"Nary time! you were as cool as a cucumber!" the marshal replied.

"Well, gentlemen of the jury, I reckon that is the case," the mayor remarked. "You know as much about the affair now as any one does. Mr. Talbot and Mexican Mike had a growl in the morning, and the Maverick Man got pounded; then at midnight he was found on the street, dying, with a knife in his back, which, beyond any dispute, was Mr. Talbot's weapon, and from what little he said, it is plain he knew who struck him—no stranger, but a man whom he believed he could fight if he had had any chance, but he died before he could name the party."

"Now the point is right here: Did Mr. Talbot believe that Mexican Mike would try to get square with him, and determine to strike the first blow—did he lay in wait for and kill the Maverick Man, without giving the Mexican any chance for his life?"

"Mr. Talbot, you can define your position," said the mayor, in conclusion, with a courteous bow to the prisoner.

"Gentlemen, I have only a few words to say," the Ranch King remarked. "In the first place, that Mexican Mike was killed with my knife, there is no doubt, but that I did the killing, upon my solemn oath I deny. There was no reason why I should kill the man. He made threats against me, as he has done to a number of ranchers who have warned him to leave their beeves alone. The Maverick Man was not a fellow to scare me, no matter how he came at me. My knife was evidently stolen from my belt in the saloon, and I did not miss it until the marshal asked for the loan of the weapon. If I had committed the murder, gentlemen, I would hardly have been fool enough to go away and leave the knife behind, knowing that it would be quickly recognized as my property. Some enemy has put up a job on me, and, too cowardly to face me in open fight, thinks to strike at my life in this way. My cinch was cut nearly through, so I would be detained on my homeward ride; that was to give the marshal a chance to catch up with me. That is all I have to say, gentlemen."

CHAPTER IX.

UNEXPECTED EVIDENCE.

THE disclosure in regard to the saddle created a deal of surprise, for it was entirely new to everybody.

The saddle was produced and, sure enough, it was as the Ranch King had said.

Many a head was gravely wagged, for this deepened the mystery.

"Well, gentlemen, I suppose you might as well retire and deliberate as to your verdict," the mayor declared.

At this point a man pushed his way through the crowd.

"Hold on, Mr. Mayor!" he exclaimed. "I think I have a little testimony to offer which may throw some light upon this affair."

All eyes were turned upon the new-comer. He was a stranger, and none ever remembered to have seen him before.

He was a man about the medium size, dressed roughly, like a cowboy, rather a good-looking fellow, but his unshaven chin, on which appeared a bristle-like beard, and the rough shock of coarse hair which half-covered his forehead made him look far worse than he would otherwise appear.

"Ah! you know something about this matter?" the mayor asked.

"Yes; I saw the blow struck!"

This statement created a sensation, and every neck was stretched to gaze at the witness.

"You are a stranger here in Silveropolis?" the mayor questioned.

"Yes; I only arrived last night; I am a cowboy seeking employment; I am a stranger to Arizona, and come from New Mexico. My name is Jo Cadoza, and I am a half-breed."

"Ah, yes, I see; go ahead!"

"Last night I got in town about nine o'clock and went to the Hotel de Sonora, and there fell in with a jolly gang, and the first thing I knew my money was gone and I was full."

"Very natural, under the circumstances," the mayor remarked.

"Having no money to pay for a bed I hunted up a place to sleep. I was so full that I was glad to get a chance to sleep anywhere."

"Yes, of course."

"I found a shed and laid down by the wall. Hardly had I stretched myself out when a horseman rode up the street. He passed me, peering on all sides as though he was looking for some one; this attracted my attention, and so I kept my eyes on him. He got off his horse and hid the beast behind a house on the opposite side of the street, then he drew his knife and stole up the street until he came to another house, behind which he hid. Pretty soon another man came along; he had been drinking, for his steps were unsteady; as soon as he passed the watcher sprung out upon him and struck him in the back with the knife; the man who was struck gave a yell, wheeled around, so as to catch sight of the face of the murderer, attempted to grapple with him, but the other dodged and ran for his horse; then the wounded man fell upon his face; the other mounted his horse and rode off, not taking the road, but going across the prairie behind the houses."

"And you made no attempt to stop or to follow him?" the mayor asked.

"I couldn't! I was too drunk! After I was once down I couldn't get up again to save me," the fellow replied with perfect candor. "Then the people all rushed out into the street and I went to sleep."

"Did you say anything about this matter to any one?" the mayor asked.

"No, I didn't; I didn't know the rights of the thing, and I thought I might get into trouble if I said anything, but seeing as how everything is all right I thought I would come forward and tell what I saw."

Could you pick out the man who used the knife?"

"Well, I don't know," the cowboy replied with a dubious shake of the head, "when he was in the moonlight, where I could see him, I did not pay any particular attention to him, and when he got out his knife and began to creep about in the shadows it was too dark for me to make him out, and then I was so drunk, too, you know, that I wouldn't like to swear to the man."

"Do you see any one here that looks like the horseman?"

"Yes, that gentleman there"—and he pointed to Dick Talbot—"looks like the man, but, as I said, I wouldn't swear to it. I could pick out the horse though, I think."

"Aha! what kind of a beast was it?"

Every ear in the assemblage was eagerly bent to listen.

"A dark horse, sorrel or bay, with two white fore-feet and a blaze in the forehead," the cowboy answered immediately.

The audience drew a long breath.

The man had exactly described the Ranch King's horse.

"Well, gentlemen of the jury, I s'pose you don't need to see the horse?" the mayor remarked.

The jury shook their heads; they were so oppressed by the stunning weight of this evidence that they did not feel like speaking. All knew to whom such a horse belonged.

"Mr. Talbot, you can fire away at him now," the mayor remarked, and, from the look upon the face of the official, the Ranch King guessed that this evidence had satisfied the mayor that he was a guilty man.

Dick Talbot was puzzled; the man seemed honest enough—seemed to be telling what he believed to be the truth; but if he was not honest—if he was playing a part—who had set him on?

Talbot asked a few questions with the idea of getting the man to admit that he had been so drunk that he was in no condition to swear to anything.

But the man stuck to his tale; he was drunk, but knew what he was about, although incapable of much motion.

The case was given to the jury.

They did not even take the trouble to retire, but put their heads together and consulted just where they were.

The betting was five to one that the Ranch King would be convicted.

The jury resumed their former position in a few moments, and Clairborne arose.

"Your Honor, we find the prisoner guilty of murder in the first degree, and our sentence is that he be hanged to-morrow morning."

Again the crowd drew a long breath.

CHAPTER X.

THE VIGILANTES.

DICK TALBOT received the sentence in the coolest possible way; the foreman of the jury, Clairborne, showed far more agitation than he.

"Gentlemen of the jury, while I am not kicking against your decision, for I don't doubt that all of you are honest in your belief that I am a guilty man, yet I must remark that I think you are giving me scant time to prepare for this great leap in the dark to which you have condemned me. I have considerable property to dispose of—a great deal of business to arrange, and, as long as I am perfectly safe in your hands, I don't see why you cannot give me four or five days, so that I may have time to settle my affairs; I don't think I am asking anything out of the way—nothing but what any man of you would like to have if you were situated as I am."

"I think, gentlemen, that Mr. Talbot is talking good common sense now," the mayor hastened to say. "We want to do everything decently and in order, you know, and it appears to me that it is rather crowding the mourners to set the hanging match at so early a date as to-morrow."

The jury again put their heads together, and, after discussing the matter for a few moments, Clairborne announced:

"Mr. Mayor, we have talked the thing over and come to the conclusion that we will give Mr. Talbot a little more time. This is Monday, and we will set the hanging for next Friday—Friday is the regular hangman's day, you know, and the jury hopes, Mr. Talbot, that this programme will be agreeable to you."

"Oh, yes, that will do, all right, and I am much obliged to you, gentlemen, for your kindness," the Ranch King replied.

This ended the trial.

Dick Talbot was escorted back to the calaboose, and, at Clairborne's suggestion, a police guard was formed to guard the jail until after the execution of the prisoner.

The gambler explained to the mayor:

"From what I have heard, it seems that the ranchers are inclined to be a little ugly about this affair. They argue that Mexican Mike was a notorious cattle-thief, and even if Talbot did kill him, he got no more than he deserved, for he ought to have been killed long ago."

"We can't permit the ranchers to run the town, nohow you can fix it!" the marshal declared.

He was present at the interview.

"Oh, I don't think they will try to rescue Talbot," the mayor remarked, always disposed to look on the bright side.

"If they know that we are ready for them, the chances are big that they will not try it. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure in all cases of this kind," Clairborne observed.

"You never said a truer word in your life!" the marshal cried.

And so ten well-armed men were secured, and the watch was kept up by night as well as by day.

In the afternoon, after his conviction, Talbot had a long interview with his wife, making arrangements in regard to his affairs, all supposed, but what those arrangements were, the town of Silveropolis was soon to discover.

That night a brawny, red-headed giant made his appearance in the town, and proceeded to "set 'em up" for the boys in the most liberal manner.

He made the round of all the saloons, and displayed his cash with wonderful recklessness.

"I'm from Upper Arizona!" he proclaimed. "And I am the biggest kind of a chief when I am at home; I don't take water for no man that walks, and I've jest struck a leetle the biggest lead a hundred miles north of here that ever a man tumbled into! You hear me, boyees, that is my horn wot's tooting!"

The result of this lavish display of gold, and the generosity with which the stranger spent his cash, was, that about midnight, he had got around him a gang of twenty of the hardest cases in the town.

Then the Mexican Mike affair happened to come up, and when the stranger learned the particulars, his rage knew no bounds.

"You don't mean to say that the gay old Maverick Man was killed right in this hyer town, and that you have got the critter in the calaboose wot did the knifing?" he cried. "Mexican Mike, my old side-pardner! the whitest Mexican galoot that ever struck Arizona! Boyees, you ain't got no sand in yer craws or you would have strung up this hyer Talbot right away to one't!"

Some one remarked that he would be hung on Friday.

"Don't you believe it!" cried the red-headed giant, in high disdain. "That is only a skin game to get the man off. When Friday comes, you'll find the galoot ain't thar. He's a rich rancher, eh?"

The crowd said he was.

"His money will git him off. But if he had been a poor man he would have been hung, right away. Oh, I tell you, gen'lemen, thar's

no justice for a man in this hyer world if he ain't got plenty of ducats."

And so the big fellow went on until he got the "gang" excited.

They were all well under the influence of liquor, and just ripe for mischief.

Finally some one said it was about time that Judge Lynch put in an appearance in Silveropolis, and the suggestion took like wildfire.

"That's it! Judge Lynch!" the big fellow howled. "Call the Vigilantes up, and make short work of this red-handed murderer. Give me a rope and I'll show you how to do the trick!"

In cases of this kind, it does not take long for the movement to get under way, for the frenzy spreads like a contagious fever, and inside of thirty minutes from the time that the rising of Judge Lynch was suggested in the Hotel de Sonora, fifty angry men were howling for admittance at the door of the jail, all of them armed, and the majority acting like lunatics.

Clairborne, Oglethorpe and the marshal were three of the five guards on duty inside the calaboose on this night, and when the mob first commenced to yell at the door, they presented a bold front, and warned the lynchers that if they attempted to enter it would cost them dear.

But when they found that the mob were determined to get in, and were preparing beams to use as battering-rams to break in the door, they began to seriously consider if it would not be wise to yield to the demand.

Clairborne exclaimed:

"By Jove, boys! I believe these fellows mean business, and I don't see any use of our risking our lives when there isn't any chance of beating off this crowd. To judge by the noise they are kicking up there must be a hundred out there, and we could not hope to fight any such gang."

"Not by a darned sight!" cried the marshal, who did not relish the idea. "And as long as the fellow is going to be hung, what difference does it make whether he dies to-night or next Friday?"

"Not a bit!" Oglethorpe declared. "And we would be a lot of idiots to sacrifice our lives in attempting to fight this mob."

"That's so, that's so!" cried the other two guards, whose lips were paling with fear as they listened to the fierce cries of the angry men without.

"I say, open the door and let them in!" Clairborne cried. "They are going to break it open, anyway, and if they do that, in the rush some of us may get hurt."

"Sure as ye'r born!" the marshal coincided. "I'll let 'em in, for we ain't called upon to risk our lives for nothing!"

Advancing to the door he removed the fastening and threw the portal open.

In streamed the crowd, some bearing torches, the burly, red-bearded fellow at the head flourishing a rope.

"Whar is he—whar's the red-handed murderer?" he howled.

Another moment and Talbot's cell was invaded by the mob.

Undauntedly Dick Talbot faced the threatening men.

CHAPTER XI.

THE HANGING MATCH.

THE red-bearded stranger led the mob, but only three of them entered the apartment, the rest filling the outer room and blocking the doorway.

In his hand the big fellow held the fatal rope, the noose already formed; behind him came a man with a torch, and another with a brace of revolvers.

"Talbot, you p'ison galoot, your hour has come!" roared the big fellow.

"All right; I am ready for you, gentlemen, and I reckon I am not the man to show the white feather, even if you are all howling for my blood!" the prisoner replied.

"That is the way to talk!" the giant cried, approvingly. "Die game, like a man!"

"That is the hand I will play, and I reckon you will all say, when the thing is over, that I threw my cards for all they were worth!" the doomed man remarked.

The red-bearded man threw the noose around Talbot's neck.

"Come along, Mr. Talbot, we will treat you like a gen'leman even if we are going to string you up. Pass the word without for the boys to form in line," the big fellow continued. "We have got our antelope and he is coming along as quietly as a lamb."

With the announcement all tumult ceased, the men without formed in a sort of a procession, and when the big fellow made his appearance with the prisoner, the mob surrounded them.

"I reckon that clump of cottonwoods to the south of the camp is as good a place as any for this hyer leetle fandango to come off," the red-beard remarked.

"Yes, yes!" cried a dozen voices.

Away they went, forming a strange spectacle as they marched along in the semi-darkness, for the night was a cloudy one and the light of the moon partially obscured.

The mayor had been awakened by the tumult, hurriedly dressed himself and hastened forth, but when he found what a mob was up, he did not attempt to interfere, but with a number of others, not identified with the lynch-party, followed in the rear for the purpose of seeing the thing through.

With the mayor were the guards who had had charge of the prisoner.

Clairborne explained the situation to Plunkett.

"Oh, of course it was no use for you to attempt to fight such a gang as this," his Honor said. "You would have only lost your own lives without saving his, and, since he is to die anyway, a day or two will not make much difference."

The clump of cottonwoods, of which the red-bearded stranger had spoken, was about a quarter of a mile south of the town, and instead of being a clump, was a good-sized grove, thirty or forty trees.

Apart from the grove—ten or fifteen feet from it—was a solitary tree, a big fellow with one particular branch extending at a right angle from the parent trunk.

"Jest the thing, by hookey!" exclaimed the big fellow as his eyes fell upon the branch, and then, with the skill born of long experience, he cast the rope over the branch, placed Talbot under this natural gallows, adjusted the noose around his neck, took out a handkerchief and tied his hands together before him. When the prisoner was prepared he called for volunteers to take hold of the end of the rope.

A dozen responded.

"Now, gentlemen, stand back and give us a fair show for our money!" the big fellow exclaimed, waving back the crowd.

The mob complied and moved back, until about twenty feet from the prisoner.

Talbot stood on one side of the tree, the men at the rope on the other, the red-bearded man in front of him, and back of the big stranger the spectators.

"Now, Mr. Talbot, your time in this hyer world is short," the big fellow remarked. "And if you have got anything you want to say, you had better spit it out as quickly as possible."

"Well, I don't know as I care to say much," the prisoner replied, apparently not concerned by the near approach of his doom. "I don't exactly like the way you have arranged this hempen necktie which you have so kindly given me; I think custom requires that the knot should be under the left ear, so!"

And with his fettered hands he moved the knot to the position indicated.

"You are a cool 'un!" the other declared.

"Are you all ready now?"

"Yes, yes, I reckon so."

"Now, boyees, when I say one, two, three, go! run him up lively, you understand?"

The men at the rope nodded, and tightened their grip.

"Wa-al, so-long, Mr. Talbot; sorry that we have got to put you through this course of sprouts, but sich is life!"

"Don't mention it; pitch in!" was the sport's cool response.

"One, two, three, go!"

With the word the men at the rope started on a run, while the rest watched the scene with anxious eyes.

Only a single pull did the fellows who were at the rope give though, and then they went sprawling all in a heap on the ground, for instead of running the prisoner up to the branch, as they anticipated, the noose around Talbot's neck gave way, and in a couple of bounds he gained the shelter of the cottonwoods.

A mighty yell went up on the air from the throats of the crowd, and they clutched their weapons with the idea of rushing forward to capture the Ranch King.

But their yell was answered by another equally as fierce, coming from the grove, and it was followed by a ringing volley of revolver-shots.

With a loud yell the red-bearded man threw up his hands, then reeled and went down all in a heap.

This was quite enough for the majority of the spectators.

They did not stand upon the order of their going but "got" at race-horse speed.

A few daring souls fired at the grove, and were answered with another discharge of revolver-shots which whistled so near their ears that they were glad to follow the example of their companions and retreat at the top of their speed.

It was, "save yourself, and the fiend take the hindmost!"

Not until they gained the shelter of the town did the fugitives pause.

Then they commenced to count noses, for the purpose of ascertaining who had been hurt in the fight, but, as far as could be discovered, only the big red-bearded stranger was missing.

"He was killed at the first fire!" a dozen asserted.

"Some friends of the Ranch King's must have got together when they found he was to

be hanged, and concealed themselves in the grove, knowing that it was the only place near the camp where a man could be hung," said the mayor, and all believed that it was probably correct.

Then, upon finding that only one man had been hurt, the citizens waxed brave, and feeling somewhat ashamed of the "holy show" which, as a cynical cuss observed, they had made of themselves, clamored to be led against the ranchers, for they had no doubt it was these gentlemen who had come to the rescue of Dick Talbot.

The marshal, with swelling dignity, declared he would like no better fun than to "clean out" the ranchers, and he volunteered to lead the host.

Both Clairborne and Oglethorpe, though, declined to go with the party.

"Oh, no," said the man from Alabama, "the game is ended, and there isn't any use to chip in until there is a new deal."

The party started, though, but unsatisfactory indeed were the results of the expedition.

No trace was found of either the prisoner, the men who had been concealed within the wood, or the big red bearded fellow who had fallen in the fight.

It was an extremely mysterious affair, and the more the citizens of Silveropolis pondered upon it, the more bewildered they became.

CHAPTER XII.

PREPARING FOR WAR.

It was after two o'clock when the marshal and his party returned; everybody was tired out by this time, and as it was plain nothing more could be done until morning, the citizens retired to rest.

About everybody in the town, though, was up bright and early in the morning, and the stirring events of the previous night were the general topic of conversation.

The mayor did not rise until about seven, and when he went to the restaurant to get his breakfast, he was waylaid all along the street by citizens who anxiously inquired what was going to be done about the matter.

And to one and all the mayor made the same answer:

"This is a matter to be decided upon by the citizens of Silveropolis themselves. I propose to call a meeting in front of my store at nine o'clock, and to adopt such course of action as may then be decided upon."

At the restaurant the mayor met the two gamblers, Clairborne and Oglethorpe, also the marshal, John Livingstone.

All had come there for the same purpose, breakfast, and took seats at one table, so as to be able to talk while they ate.

"I have been thinking over that affair of last night," Clairborne remarked, "and have about come to the conclusion that we were the victims of as cunning a trick as I ever saw worked."

"How so?" asked the mayor.

"Spit it out!" cried the marshal.

"Why, the lynch business, and that big red-bearded stranger, who, as far as I can find out, was the man who started the thing."

"Odd, too, wasn't it, that he should be the only man hurt in the skirmish?" the mayor observed.

"Oh, I don't believe he was hurt!" the gambler exclaimed. "That was all a game to stampede the crowd."

"And it did it, too!" cried the marshal, with his mouth full. "I was carried away by the rush, and before I knew what I was doing, was footing it to the camp as lively as any man in the gang."

"Yes, fear in such a case is contagious," Oglethorpe said. "I did some pretty tall running myself."

"Well, gentlemen, the thing was a brace game from beginning to end!" Clairborne declared. "The red-bearded fellow came here in Talbot's interest, and worked the lynch business so as to give the ranchers a chance to rescue the Ranch King."

The rest reflected upon the matter for a few minutes, and then they agreed that Clairborne had probably hit upon the truth.

"It is so, and there's no two ways about it!" the gambler declared. "And the camp ought to be ashamed of itself to be so easily fooled!"

"Oh, such things will happen," the mayor remarked. "And now, gentlemen, how do the citizens feel about this matter? Are they inclined to let it drop, seeing that Talbot has got safely away?"

"Not by a durned sight!" cried the marshal. "I tell you what it is, Mister Mayor, the camp is mad, clear through! I have jest been waltzing 'round pretty lively this morning, and I know jest how the boys feel. It is jest this way: are we men of Silveropolis to run the town, or is a pack of these blamed ranchers to make things hum?"

"Most certainly the citizens will run this town," the mayor replied, who did not like the way things were going. Having a large and profitable trade with the ranchmen, he was anxious not to have it disturbed, therefore his voice was for peace.

"That is it, exactly! The men of this hyer

town are of the opinion that the days are over when the cowboys kin come in and run the camp."

"Oh, yes, if any gang of cowboys should try that game they would be cleaned out so quickly that it would make their heads swim!" Clairborne declared.

"Then they are not inclined to let the matter drop?" the mayor asked, thoughtfully.

"Not by a blamed sight!" the marshal replied. "Talbot murdered a man right on the main street of this hyer town, had a fair trial, was convicted, and now the citizens propose to carry out the sentence, or know the reason why!"

"Say, I have an idea!" exclaimed Clairborne. "Suppose, Livingstone, that you take three or four deputies with you and go to Talbot's ranch, maybe you will be able to surprise him."

The marshal shook his head.

"Oh, no, I reckon the Ranch King is no slouch; he will not be fool enuff to let me ketch him," Livingstone replied.

"Well, at any rate, you can see exactly how the land lays; as it is, we are talking in the dark," the gambler urged.

"Yes, I think the idea is a good one," the mayor remarked. He wanted to settle the matter peacefully if he could.

"Come to think on it, I reckon I might be able to pick up some useful information," the marshal observed. "I'll git my men together and light out as soon as I get through with my hash."

"I was going to have a meeting of the citizens this morning to decide what ought to be done, but I will put it off now until afternoon when you will, probably, be back."

"Yes, unless I have a fight and the Ranch King puts me into a condition for planting," the marshal replied with a grim smile.

Half an hour later, Livingstone, with four well-armed men, was on his way to the ranch of Dick Talbot.

It was a good two hours' ride from Silveropolis, but in due time the party came in sight of the ranch, which was a strong 'doby' building, built in the good old Mexican way, in the form of a hollow square with a court-yard in the center, access to which was had by a covered gateway, wherein swung a heavy door, strong enough to resist almost any attack, except that of artillery.

All these isolated Mexican ranch-houses were built as much for defense as for shelter, and all were calculated to stand a siege, for the wild red braves had an unpleasant habit of making untimely calls, when they were least expected, and had it not been for the protection afforded by the strong walls of unburnt brick, 'dobies' in the vernacular, it would not have been possible for the whites to live in the country.

As the posse rode up, they noticed that the big door was closed, something unusual except in the time of Indian troubles, and the marshal remarked to the others:

"Wa-al, boys, I reckon we ain't a-goin' to get in."

There was no appearance of life until the horsemen were within a hundred feet of the building, and had pulled their steeds to a walk, then a man, with a rifle in his hand, rose from behind the parapet which guarded the flat roof of the hacienda, leveled the weapon full at the horsemen, and cried:

"Halt thar!"

The horsemen did so; such a command, enforced as it was by a repeating-rifle, was not one to be lightly regarded.

For a moment the man on the roof and the marshal's party gazed at each other, and then the rifleman burst into a hoarse laugh.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he roared, "durn my old mule's left hind leg! if it ain't the marshal! and on hossback, too; but you don't need no hoss, you marshal galoot, with them shanks of yourn, for you are the boss runner, ho, ho, ho!"

The man on the house-top was the red-bearded giant who had stirred up the Vigilantes.

The readers of the Talbot series who are familiar with bold Injun Dick and his parads, have probably recognized this robust specimen of the far West long ere this.

It was Dandy Jim, who prided himself upon being The-Man-from-Red-Dog.

The rage of the marshal and his men was great upon recognizing the red-bearded fellow, which they did, of course, as soon as he appeared fairly in sight, and his allusion to the marshal's abilities in the running line did not tend to improve that gentleman's temper.

"You durned red-headed galoot!" cried Livingstone, shaking his fist at the scoffing giant, "I have got it in for you!"

"All right, I'm your antelope! Let me know when you light on me, won't you?" retorted the The-Man-from-Red-Dog.

"But you ain't the man I'm arter; Dick Talbot, the Ranch King, is my mutton!" the marshal cried.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Livingstone?" the Ranch King asked, making his appearance in the doorway of the ranch.

"Morning, Mr. Talbot," said Livingstone, with a duck of the head, intended for a bow. "I come to arrest you."

"It cannot be done!" Dick Talbot replied, decidedly.

"We are all armed, and we mean business!" the marshal declared, in a threatening way.

"And we are all armed, and mean business, too," was the reply, and, as the Ranch King waved his hand, his little army, composed of six cowboys and the Indian, Mud Turtle, all armed with repeating rifles, made their appearance from behind the parapet which had concealed them.

"You perceive I have men enough here to eat you up in a fair fight on the open, so I reckon you will understand you have a better chance to be struck by lightning than to take me from behind these walls."

"Then you bid defiance to the law?" the marshal cried.

"To the law that you represent, yes, most decidedly."

"All right; when I come again I will have a hundred men at my back!"

"And I will whip you and your hundred men out of your boots if you have the pluck to assail me in my fortress!" Talbot cried, in defiance.

After such an answer, there was nothing more to be said.

The marshal and his men returned to Silveropolis and told their tale.

Great was the rage of the citizens, and, in meeting assembled, they determined to capture Talbot, if it took every man in the camp, and immediately they set to work to raise an army.

Don Santander was about the only man in the town who was lukewarm, but he held his peace. To his daughter, though, he said:

"These men are boasting loudly of what they will do, but they should remember their own proverb, 'Talk is cheap, but it takes the gold to buy land!'"

CHAPTER XIII. A SURPRISE.

THE mining-camp was in a fever of excitement; the bold defiance of the Ranch King had roused the spirit of the citizens, and on all sides the determination was expressed to teach "Mister Dick Talbot" a lesson which would be apt to last him for a lifetime.

They would show these ranchers that Silveropolis would stand no nonsense, and if any man set out to "buck" against the town, he would have a hard road to travel.

It was arranged that the expedition was to set out on the following morning, and all that day the citizens were busily engaged in preparing for the war.

The ranchers who were unlucky enough to come to Silveropolis had to undergo a cross-examination, which was far from being pleasant.

Were they going to stand up for that red-handed murderer, Dick Talbot, or would they chip in to help the town lay him out?

Under the circumstances, it was not surprising that of the men thus interrogated none were bold enough to say outright that they believed the Ranch King to be an innocent man.

While these preparations were going on, under the active leadership of John Livingstone, the marshal, who swaggered around the town with the air of a man who believed himself to be as great a fighter as had ever led an army into the field, the sports, Clairborne and Oglethorpe, who had previously taken a prominent part, withdrew into the background, as also did the mayor.

This exactly suited the marshal, for he wanted to arrange everything to please himself.

The mayor refrained from taking an active part because he was a man of peace, and, if he could have had his way, would have let the matter drop. The dead man was no account, anyway, and to his notion it was absurd to kick up such a fuss about a rascal of a Mexican, who was known to be a notorious cattle-thief.

The sports talked the matter over after the citizens came to the conclusion to raise a force to capture Talbot.

"I say, George, I don't think we want any of this in ours," Clairborne remarked.

"No, I don't see as there is any call for us to chip in to this game," the other replied.

"The thing is a bad break for the marshal."

"You bet!" Oglethorpe declared. "If the Ranch King has eight or ten men in the hacienda, as they say he has, it will take a mighty big army to whip him, for he and his cowboys are fighters from 'Wayback.'"

"No doubt about that! I reckon the marshal, who is blowing so about cleaning out the ranch, has forgotten how Dick Talbot and his men broke up the brigand band of Fernando Bernal, and that Bernal was no slouch of a fighter, for he used to make mince-meat out of the Mexican troops, even when they outnumbered him ten to one."

"It is settled, then, that we haven't lost any Ranch Kings, and so will take no hand in this game?"

"Yes, I think that is our lay-out," Clairborne replied. "I am not anxious to stop a bullet, and reckon this blow-hard of a marshal will find out before he gets through with the affair

that there are more hard knocks than glory to be got out of it."

"Yes, no doubt," Oglethorpe assented. "Livingstone is a good man, and game all the way through, but he lacks sense—good, hard, hoss-sense; maybe this trouble though will knock some into him."

"We don't want to have anything to do with it. The game has gone our way from the start, and we don't want to spoil it now by giving the Ranch King and his cowboys a chance to plug us for keeps. We wanted Talbot's mouth closed, so that he would not ruin our business by saying we were running a brace game; that has been done, for no matter how this affair turns out, the Ranch King will be kept out of this camp for a long while. Then, I had a grudge against the man on account of the Don's daughter. Talbot's reputation is blasted, and so that is settled, and I have already begun to turn the affair to my advantage, so as to enable me to make a favorable impression upon Guadalupe. I met her awhile ago; she was nervous and excited over this trouble, and it would have done your heart good to have heard the way I talked to her. I explained that it would not do for me to express my sentiments openly, the town being so excited about the matter, but I had a great doubt in regard to Talbot's guilt, now that I had time to think the matter over, and I had decided to take no part in this attack on him."

"Oh, that was playing it very low down!" the other sport cried with a chuckle.

"Yes, you ought to have seen how her great black eyes sparkled with gratitude. She took it all in—law and gospel, you know, and I reckon I am pretty solid with her just now."

"Maybe if you play your cards well you will get her after all," Oglethorpe suggested.

"Well, I reckon my chance is worth betting on!" Clairborne declared.

Just about the time that this conversation was taking place between the two sports, a couple of strangers arrived in the town and put up at the Silver Ship.

Jonathan Morton and William Bledstone were the names they gave, and said they had lately come from Santa Fé.

Morton was a good-looking man, with blue eyes and a light beard, while his companion had black eyes and hair, and a beard of the same hue.

They announced that they were speculators on the lookout for paying investments, and had been advised to come to Silveropolis, as the town was booming.

Naturally such men were warmly greeted, and all whom they met endeavored to make them feel at home.

The reader has probably recognized in these two "speculators," the pair who visited the brigand, Bernal, in his dungeon at Guaymas, and were instrumental in his escape.

Naturally the preparations that were being made for the attack on the Ranch King did not escape their attention, and when they inquired concerning the armed men, who were strutting up and down the street, they were soon put in possession of all the particulars.

The pair exchanged meaning glances when the story was ended, and then returned to their room.

"Well, it appears that fortune is standing our friend in this matter," Morton remarked when they were in their apartment with the door closed.

"Yes, no need to plot and plan, for by the time that this affair is ended, the Ranch King will, probably, have gone the way of all flesh!"

"Undoubtedly! You can see from the way they talk that the citizens have got their blood up, and they intend to either kill Talbot in this fight, or, if he is captured, to hang him."

"The trouble and money we expended on the brigand, then, was thrown away," Bledstone remarked.

"So it appears; we shall not need his services, for Dick Talbot's fate will be settled before he will be able to get a chance at him."

At this point there was a tap on the door.

"Come in!" said Morton, thinking it was some servant of the house.

The door opened, and into the apartment came the half-breed, Jo Cadoza, whose evidence had gone so far to securing the Ranch King's conviction.

He nodded in the most familiar manner to the two, who stared at him, closed the door, and helped himself to a chair.

Then, noticing the amazed look upon the faces of the pair, he burst into a loud laugh.

"Ha, ha, ha! you don't know me!"

"Bernal!" they exclaimed simultaneously.

It was the brigand, but his disguise had so changed him that it was no wonder he had not been recognized.

The stubby beard, which he had allowed to grow, the rough wig, the wash which had stained his skin, so that he was almost as dark as an Indian, had completely altered his appearance.

"Yes, it is Bernal, the man who by this time would have been food for worms if you had not

needed his services and so came to his aid, for which I thank you most sincerely, although, of course, your action was inspired by self-interest."

"There is an old adage which says, 'Talk of the devil and he appears,'" Morton remarked.

"Ah, you were conversing about me, then?"

"Yes, your knock interrupted the conversation," Morton replied.

"I will wager a golden ounce that you had no suspicion that I was anywhere in the neighborhood!"

"You are right, we did not suspect it."

"And we were just remarking that affairs had turned out in such a way that we would not need your aid to tumble Dick Talbot to the dust," Bledstone remarked.

A peculiar expression appeared on the face of the brigand.

"Well, this Talbot does seem to be in a bad way," he remarked.

"Yes, extremely so."

"Fate itself worked for you, eh? played your game as well as though you had directed the casting of the cards?"

There was a peculiar intonation in the speech which caused the pair to glance at each other, and then at the brigand.

"Have you heard all the particulars of this Talbot affair?" Bernal asked, before either one of the others could speak.

They nodded.

"How he was convicted mainly on the evidence of one man, who saw the blow struck—could not exactly swear as to the man who wielded the blow, but could to the horse he rode?"

At this point a light broke in upon the others.

"Aha! you were the man!" Morton exclaimed.

"Yes, you are right; I was the drunken half-breed cowboy, Jo Cadoza, and without my evidence it is safe to say the Ranch King would not have been found guilty. Now, if you come to look closely into this matter, perhaps you will come to the conclusion that Providence did not deign to interfere in your favor as much as you thought, and that if you had left me in Guaymas jail, to be shot to death by the Mexican troops, this Ranch King would not have got into this trouble."

"Upon my word, Bernal, you are a head and shoulders better than I thought you!" Morton exclaimed.

"Bah!" exclaimed the brigand chief, in contempt. "If I was not one man picked out of ten thousand, do you suppose I would have been able to lead the life I did—to reign as a very king in Sonora, despite all the efforts of the Mexican Government to hunt me down?"

"You deserved your reputation, evidently!" Morton exclaimed.

"I begin to see into this thing now," Bledstone remarked. "You planned a wonderful scheme and carried it out to perfection."

"Ah, you were the man, then, who settled this Mexican Mike—" Morton cried.

"And stole the Ranch King's knife so as to fix the crime on him!" the other continued.

"Michael Castillo, or Mexican Mike, the Maverick Man, as he was called in this neighborhood, was once a member of my band," the brigand said, his face darkening in anger. "He was captured with the rest, and turned informer to save his miserable life. He swore the lives of his comrades away, and so went free himself; the doom of the traitor is death, and the first one of the betrayed men to meet him executed vengeance upon the craven coward!"

"Well, we made a deuce of a blunder, for we never suspected you were in this neighborhood, or had aught to do with the affair," Morton admitted.

"The end is not yet," the brigand remarked, significantly. "The Ranch King has been driven from Silveropolis, but he is not dead, and, to my thinking, the chances are great that he will beat these fellows, who are boasting so loudly of what they will do."

"Suppose he does?" Bledstone queried.

"Then will come my chance, but I am not going to butt my head against a stone wall, like these fools! I shall watch for an opportunity to take him unawares."

"Alone?" Morton asked.

"Oh, no, I have found some of my old men, and already have the beginning of a new band. I propose to soon show the world that Fernando Bernal is as good a man as ever. Soon you will hear that the Hawks of Cababi are again on the wing. I have my eyes on certain ranches which will be likely to yield rich booty. Then, too, I have fallen in love; during my long sojourn in Guaymas jail I was denied the delights of female society, but now I mean to make up for it. In this town there is a charming girl, the daughter of an old Don who was once a wealthy man, but now sadly reduced. This lady fair I intend to seize, as soon as I organize my band, and bear away to my mountain home, but I will attend to your work first. And that reminds me, I am a little short of cash—"

"I shall be delighted to oblige you!" Morton immediately exclaimed. "How much?"

"A hundred would aid me."
The money was immediately counted into his hand.

"Thanks! I am your debtor ever!"

The brigand rose to depart.

"The expedition against the Ranch King starts to-morrow morning," Bernal said, with his hand on the latch. "If you are fond of amusement take it in! If I am not greatly mistaken, Talbot and his cowboys will give these braggarts such a warm reception, if they dare to attack him, that a large number of them will regret the rash adventure. I speak with reason, for I know the Ranch King and his men; they struck me, and utterly destroyed my band; a mere handful of men accomplished the task, which had baffled a whole regiment of Mexican troops; *adios!*"

The brigand departed.

"Shall we go?" Morton asked.

"Yes, most certainly, the fight will be well worth the seeing!"

Bright and early on the following morning the marshal started with his force, fifty odd in number, but in their rear came as many more who desired to witness the fight.

Silveropolis was almost depopulated.

When the expedition came within a quarter of a mile of Talbot's ranch it halted, and John Livingstone rode forward with a flag of truce.

No sign of life was there about the place.

Had the Ranch King fled, dreading the attack?

Was the mere display of force sufficient to scare bold Dick Talbot from his lair?

CHAPTER XIV.

A PARLEY.

THE ranch of Dick Talbot was situated on a gently-rolling prairie, unbroken by bush or tree for miles in all directions, so there was no "cover" to afford protection to an attacking foe.

Any attempt to storm the fortifications would have to be made over the open ground, a circumstance which made a few wise men in the attacking force shake their heads gravely, for now that they were on the field of action they comprehended how difficult was the job the citizens of Silveropolis had undertaken.

A large majority of the "warriors," though, had no idea that they had entered upon a task from which veteran soldiers would have shrunk, and quite a number expressed their impatience at not being led instantly to the attack.

Black Dan Dutton, notorious as being one of the biggest boasters in the camp, although he had never showed that he was half as big a chief as he claimed to be, voiced the opinion of these impatient men.

"Wot does the marshal want to do any chinning for?" he exclaimed. "Why don't he say the word, and let us smash right into the old ranch?"

"Ay, ay, that's the talk!" chimed in another, and half a dozen other idiots took up the cry.

The two sports, Clairborne and Ogleshorpe, with Mayor Plunkett, were in the rear of the speaker, the "army" and the spectators being mingled.

And as Black Dan looked around, proud at having created an impression, he caught sight of the group.

"Ain't that the way to do it? hey, Mister Mayor?" he cried.

"Well, I don't really know, Mr. Dutton; you must not appeal to me," the mayor replied. "I don't brag of my ability as a general, but it seems to an outsider, like myself, who don't pretend to know much about the art of war, that it would be an extremely difficult matter to get into that ranch, as long as the doors were closed, and we were without ladders to scale the walls, even if there were no armed men inside to oppose an entrance."

This calm, commonplace view of the subject made an impression upon the sensible men in the crowd, but the boasters shook their heads, as if to show that they did not agree with the speaker, and looked fierce.

"Oh, I reckon it won't take us galoots long to smash in the durned old door with the butts of our guns!" Black Dan declared.

"Dutton, it is plain to me that you don't know much about ranch doors in the Indian country," Clairborne remarked. "If you did, you would not talk in that way. If you had a stout beam, twenty feet long, with fifteen or twenty men to handle it as a battering-ram, then you might stand some chance of breaking open a pair of stout doors like those yonder; but I reckon a dozen of you could bang away with your guns, and the only result would be sore hands and the destruction of your weapons."

"Yes, that is so; Dutton, you are not posted!" Ogleshorpe added.

"Say, I reckon, Clairborne, that you ain't in this war, are ye?" exclaimed the braggart, scowling at the sport.

"No, I've not lost any Ranch King, but I usually claim the right to express my opinion on any subject when it suits me to do so, and if any gentleman feels wronged by my freedom I stand ready to give him any satisfaction, with any weapon, he may desire. I am not in this racket,

but I reckon, if you try me on, you will discover I am a fighter from Fighterville," Clairborne retorted.

"Wa-al, I've got other fish to fry jest now, but I'll jest bear this thing in mind," the bully remarked.

"Oh, I wouldn't do that; go for me now, and then you will get it off your mind!" the sport declared.

"One thing at a time. Dick Talbot is my mutton jest now," responded the other, who, for all his bravado, was not inclined to force the boss of the Cowboy's Ranch in a fair fight.

Clairborne was game to the backbone; he had proved that in half a dozen desperate fights, and was reckoned as expert with all kinds of weapons as any man in the town.

The words of the sport produced a decided impression, and there was a grave look on the faces of many of the citizens.

It was one thing to volunteer to "clean out" the Ranch King in the camp of Silveropolis, excitement up to fever heat, and everybody crying out that Dick Talbot and his friends must be killed or captured without delay, and quite another, when on the open prairie, drawn up in battle array, they waited for the beginning of the struggle and realized that the foe occupied so strong a position that, undoubtedly, many lives would be sacrificed before a victory could be won.

While this conversation was going on, the marshal, with his flag of truce, was advancing to the hacienda, full of confidence.

He reasoned in this way:

"When Talbot sees this big crowd he will not be likely to tumble to the fact that more than half of them are only here out of curiosity to see the fight, and that no work kin be expected from them. Nary time! He'll think, of course, that the hull-billing are on the war-path, and I reckon he won't make no fight."

In this case the wish was decidedly the father to the thought.

When Livingstone got within feet of the house, Dick Talbot made his appearance upon the roof.

The marshal halted.

"Wa-al, Talbot, we are hyer!" he exclaimed, with a wave of his hand toward the force upon the prairie.

"So I see, and, judging by the looks of things, I should think that about all the men of Silveropolis have turned out," the Ranch King remarked with a pleasant smile.

Any stranger, unacquainted with the facts of the case, would never have imagined from the Ranch King's appearance that the armed men, upon whom he gazed with so calm an eye, had come for the express purpose of putting him to a violent death.

"We mean business, Talbot," the marshal warned.

"Well, if you don't, I should say that you had gone to a great deal of unnecessary trouble," was the Ranch King's quiet rejoinder.

"I s'pose you see now that it won't be of no use for you to kick up a fuss?" Livingstone exclaimed in a very determined way.

"Bless your soul! I am not kicking up a fuss!" Talbot cried. "It is you men of Silveropolis who are doing it. I did not tell you to come out with arms in your hands, as though you expected to meet a band of hostile redskins."

"Oh, stow this talk!" cried the marshal, impatiently, suddenly coming to the conclusion that at this sort of thing he was no match for the Ranch King.

"I am hyer on business, and I want to git right down to it as soon as possible."

"That is right."

And Talbot nodded his head approvingly.

"Wa-al, are you going to surrender?"

"I think I would like to have a talk with some of your citizens before I answer that question."

"Eh?" exclaimed the marshal, surprised at the request.

"I say I would like to have a talk with some of the men yonder—let the citizens select five or six to come here with you."

"Oh, thar ain't any need of that!" the marshal declared. "I want you to understand, Mister Talbot, that I am the boss of the crowd; I am running this machine!"

"The mayor then is not in it?"

"Nary time!"

"But I see him yonder, unless I am mistaken."

"Yes; but he has jest come out to see how the old thing works."

"Ah, I see; and I suppose two-thirds of your crowd have come with the same idea, for I notice that there is quite a number of them who are not flourishing weapons."

The hawk-like eyes of Dick Talbot had served him well.

"I reckon you will find thar is enuff of them when they go for you!" Livingstone cried, with a flourish.

"If we have a talk that thing may be avoided," Talbot observed, dryly.

The marshal reflected over the matter for a moment. He did not like the idea, but did not well see how he could refuse.

"Wa-al, I'll see about it. I reckon it won't do any harm."

And then Livingstone returned to the citizens who awaited his arrival with lively impatience.

CHAPTER XV.

A NOVEL PROPOSAL.

THE objection that the marshal had to this course was that it had a tendency to take the direction of affairs out of his hands, and this did not suit him, for he wanted to be "the great I am!"

He consented, because he guessed from the manner of the Ranch King that if he did not, Talbot would refuse to talk at all.

When he came up to the citizens they eagerly crowded around him, and he made known the request of the Ranch King.

The others received it in an extremely favorable manner, for to the minds of the majority of them it appeared as if it was a sign that Talbot was "weakening;" the approach of so large a force had filled him with alarm, but when this opinion was openly expressed and Clairborne appealed to in regard to it the sport shook his head.

"Gentlemen, I am sorry to say that I don't take any stock in that idea," he remarked. "The Ranch King is no fool; when he made his bluff, and defied the marshal to take him out of his ranch, he knew what he was talking about and understood he would have to fight. He knew that it was a hundred to one that the town would go for him, and if he wanted to get out he has had ample time to scoot; but from the fact that he is here you can bet all you are worth he has determined to face the music."

"Why do you suppose he wishes this talk?" the mayor asked.

"Oh, that is a riddle not easily guessed," the sport answered. "I can only get at what the Ranch King is after by speculating upon what I would do myself under like circumstances. My game would be to come to an arrangement and avoid a fight if possible."

"The only arrangement we will come to is to take and hang him as soon as we kin git our claws onto him!" the marshal exclaimed, and then half-a-dozen of the braggarts of the camp, led by Black Dan Dutton, gave a yell and waved their weapons in the air.

"Well, of course, I am willing in this matter to be guided by the wishes of the citizens," the mayor remarked, "but it seems to me that if we could come to any honorable arrangement, by means of which a fight could be avoided, it would be wise to do so, for undoubtedly lives might be spared."

"I take it, Mister Mayor, that we men of Silveropolis can't allow any durned son of a gun of a rancher to crow over us!" the marshal cried, and the speech showed that John Livingstone's voice was still for war.

"Certainly not, certainly not!" Plunkett replied. "I said an honorable settlement."

"Say, gentlemen, ain't we wasting time?" Clairborne asked. "Hain't the committee better be selected? After the Ranch King delivers his say-so, we shall know how the ground lies."

This brought the discussion to an end, and the citizens immediately proceeded to pick out the men to serve.

The marshal was to go, of course, then the mayor was called upon, and although he said he had not come in his official capacity, but merely as a private citizen—a spectator, still he was chosen, as was also Clairborne, though he said he was in the same boat as the mayor.

Black Dan Dutton and two old citizens made up the party, and after it was organized away they went to see what Dick Talbot had to say for himself.

The party halted about forty feet from the house and Talbot advanced to the edge of the roof.

"Well, I am glad to see you, gentlemen," the Ranch King remarked, "although sorry that the circumstances of the case force you to come with arms in your hands and anger in your hearts."

"Look hyer, Talbot, it war you that began this fuss!" the marshal cried. "You know you murdered the Maverick Man!"

"Oh, no, I don't know anything of the kind; and as there is a heaven above me, gentlemen, I swear to you I am as innocent of the death of Mexican Mike as a babe unborn! The testimony of that half-breed cowboy was a lie from beginning to end! Since I have had time to think the matter over I am satisfied of it. In the beginning I was under the impression that the man was telling the truth, as it appeared to him, and that he honestly believed what he said; but it is not so. He did not see the blow struck which killed the Maverick Man, unless indeed he was the man who committed the murder. It was all a trick to insnare me, and I must admit that it worked to perfection. I had a narrow squeeze for my life and only escaped by the skin of my teeth; but, gentlemen, I did not ask you here to discuss the past; the present and the future is what we are after."

"That's the p'int!" Livingstone cried. "Are you going to surrender?"

"Go back quietly to be hung!" and the Ranch King laughed outright at the idea. "Oh, come,

Livingstone, you ought to know better than to ask such a question as that! Would *you* do it, or any of you gentlemen, if you were in my place?"

"I reckon not!" cried Clairborne.

"Oh, no!" said the mayor.

"You had a fair trial!" growled the marshal.

"Oh, yes, I have no complaints to make on that score," Dick Talbot answered. "But you must bear in mind that I did not submit voluntarily to be tried, and you must not blame me if I object to the decision of a tribunal which I had no hand in selecting."

"The evidence showed you were guilty, and you ought to be hung!" Livingstone declared.

"Marshal, you are inclined to be a little bull-headed in this matter, I see; you are spoiling for a fight. Well, now, I am not, although, gentlemen, I say to you, frankly, that I am prepared to give you the warmest reception that mortal men ever received, if you attempt to attack me in my fortress here."

"You may have an idea of laying siege to this ranch, and of starving me out, but that game will not work, for yesterday I laid in provisions and water enough to last me for a month, and I also have plenty of ammunition. Your delay in attacking me also gave an opportunity to procure reinforcements, and we have a goodly number of fighting-men; see for yourselves!"

Dick Talbot waved his hand; fifteen well-armed men rose from behind the parapet, which had concealed them from view, and grinned at the delegation.

"You understand, my friends, that I have made ample preparation for the fiercest kind of a war, but I am not anxious for a fight; in fact, would avoid it in any honorable way. Of course, I am not going to surrender and allow myself to be hanged; it is too much for you to expect; a man would be an idiot to do that. If I am fated to die, I might as well perish making a gallant fight for my life."

The members of the delegation looked at each other. That there was a deal of sense in the Ranch King's words, none of them could deny.

"Now then, you men of Silveropolis have decided that the death of the Maverick Man lies at my door; if there had been a fight between us, and Mexican Mike had been killed in the contest, you wouldn't call me to an account; all I would have to look for would be some friend of the dead man who might attempt to avenge his death," Dick Talbot continued.

"Yes, that is true, but you didn't give Mexican Mike any chance," the marshal complained.

"You are going on the idea that there is no doubt I killed the man, even though the lying witness, who tried to swear my life away, was not bold enough to declare that he was sure I was the man whom he pretended to see strike the blow. You convicted me on presumptive evidence, and, if you are at all well posted, you ought to know that many an innocent man has been brought to grief in that way. But there is no use in wasting time arguing this case. You hold me for the death of the Maverick Man! Well and good! I am ready to give satisfaction. If you attempt to storm my fortress here, you are certain to lose twenty or thirty men, even if you succeed in whipping me, and if you ever had a hand in a game of this sort you would understand that there is not one chance out of a hundred for you to succeed."

"My men are protected by the parapet; yours have to advance across the open plain, exposed to the full force of our fire, and if, with our repeating-rifles, we cannot lay out half your force before you can get within a dozen yards of the gate, it will be because my men don't know how to use their weapons."

Again the members of the committee looked doubtful, and the mayor shook his head as much as to say he did not admire the prospect.

That the Ranch King had made a fair statement of the case was evident to them all, and even the bull-headed marshal began to see that success was almost impossible.

"If you had the best fighting-men in the world, and double the number that you now have, the chances are big that you could not whip me," Talbot continued. "Now I am anxious to save bloodshed. It will be no pleasure to me to kill twenty or thirty of your men, and if you want satisfaction from me on account of the Maverick Man's death I am willing to give it to you."

"Pick out three of your best men, arm them with a pair of revolvers apiece, and I will meet them in a fair, square fight. If they kill me, well and good; if I am wounded so I cannot continue the struggle I am willing to be taken back to Silveropolis and be hung, and if I am the victor, then the thing is to be considered settled, and the town is not to hold resentment against me."

The bold proposal took the delegation entirely by surprise, for it was altogether unexpected.

That the Ranch King should be willing to yield the advantage he undoubtedly possessed and encounter such odds as three to one was truly amazing.

The mayor was the first to speak.

"It seems to me that Mr. Talbot has made an extremely fair proposition," he said. "And, at any rate, we ought to submit it to the consideration of our fellow-citizens yonder."

The marshal was also favorably disposed to the acceptance of the proposition, for it was his belief that the vanity of the Ranch King as to his skill had led him into a trap. He might be a good man, but three to one was big odds.

"Wa-al, I reckon we ought to see what the boys think of it," he remarked.

"All right; submit the matter to them; if they accept the terms it will surely save some bloodshed," Talbot remarked.

"We will let you know in ten minutes or so!" the marshal declared, and then the delegation returned to the townsmen, who had been eagerly watching the progress of the discussion, but too far away to hear the conversation.

CHAPTER XVI.

AN UNEVEN FIGHT.

WHEN the proposal of the Ranch King was made known to the citizens, great was their wonder.

"By Jove! the fellow is game!" Ogleshorpe declared. "You are safe in betting all your ducats on that!"

"Well, gentlemen, what do you think about the matter?" the mayor asked.

Then there was a tumult, every man trying to deliver his opinion in advance of his neighbor; there was a large majority in favor of accepting the proposition, but there were a few "bull-headed idiots," as Clairborne characterized them, who declared no arrangement ought to be made, but that they ought to "pile in and clean the durned cuss out!"

Black Dan Dutton was the leader of the crowd.

"Put the matter to a vote and let the majority rule; that is the way to settle it!" Clairborne cried at last, taking advantage of a pause in the hot discussion.

This idea met with the approval of the citizens, and the vote showed an overwhelming majority in favor of accepting the offer.

The display of force that the Ranch King had made when he waved his hand for his armed men to appear had produced a profound impression upon the minds of the attackers.

From where they stood the roof of the ranch seemed to be alive with fighting men, and after this demonstration the citizens were not anxious to march to the storming of the ranch, for it suddenly occurred to them that a good many men would be certain to be shot in the attempt, and although there were few cravens in the party, yet even brave men could not be blamed for hesitating to advance to certain death.

"Wal, that settles it!" the marshal exclaimed, when the voting was over. "We will accommodate Mister Dick Talbot, and now the p'int is, who is to do the fighting? Three men have got to step forward and represent the town."

At this announcement a large number of the citizens looked at the marshal in a peculiar way.

Livingstone immediately guessed what thoughts were in their minds, for bull-headed and obstinate as he was, he could not be said to be dull of comprehension.

"Oh, that is all right, fellow-citizens!" the marshal exclaimed. "You needn't go to making any snoots at me! I understand what you are driving at. I am the town marshal, and you reckon if there is any fighting to be done that it comes in my line. I reckon you are 'bout right thar, and you needn't be skeered as to my trying to shove my work off onto somebody else. The reason I spoke was that from the way you galoots talked I had an idee some of you was sp'iling for a fight so bad that you would feel hurt if I didn't give you a chance to hop into this fandango, but it is all right. I am number one, of course, unless somebody insists on taking my place," he added, grimly. "Now, the question is, whar's number two and three?"

The citizens looked at each other; to use the old expression, all were somewhat backward in coming forward.

Clairborne seized upon the opportunity to get a dig at Black Dan Dutton.

"Dutton will be number two!" he exclaimed. "He has been howling for blood and slaughter ever since we started."

This raised a laugh and, smarting under the jeer, the bully declared that he was "jest on the p'int of offering."

"I ain't afeard to stand up ag'in' this Ranch King!" he declared. "Although I reckon thar is one man within the sound of my voice who ain't anxious for to have any of it in his'n!"

And as he spoke he darted a venomous glance at the gambler.

"If you mean that for me, Dutton, you are safe in betting all you are worth on it!" the sport declared, with a laugh. "You never spoke a truer word in your life. I am not stacking my checks up against any Dick Talbot, just now, for I reckon the man knows what he is about, and if he wasn't the very king-pin of a fighter he would not make any such bold bluff as this three to one business."

"Wa-al, I reckon we won't be whipped until

we have fought a bit," Livingstone remarked, sarcastically.

"Now don't get off the hooks and misunderstand me, marshal," the sport was quick to remark. "All I wanted to make plain was that it is my opinion you haven't got such a soft thing of it, as it looks to be at the first glance, and if I was going to bet on the thing, I would not be willing to go three to one on your cleaning out the Ranch King."

"Wa-al, we will make a good try for it, anyway," the marshal replied, with great dignity.

"Oh, I don't doubt that; no man that knows you, Livingstone, will have any doubt but that you will stand up to the rack and take your fodder like a man," the gambler admitted.

This remark Black Dan Dutton construed as a reflection upon him, and he immediately took offense.

"I want you to understand, Mister Clairborne, that I am a hoss too when it comes to a fight!" he declared.

"Is that so?" Clairborne asked, in the most serious manner.

"Yes, sir-ee; you kin bet yer boots onto it, and I reckon that when it comes to a skirmish I kin hold my end up as well as any man in the camp."

"Dutton, if you can fight half as well as you can blow you must be the biggest kind of a chief," the sport declared.

This created a general laugh.

"Wait and you will see!" Dutton cried.

"I reckon I will have to chip into this thing," remarked Ben Perkins, the butcher, stepping forward. "I will be the third man!"

"Good for you! Bully boy!" and like cries of approval came from the crowd.

Perkins was a big fellow and reputed to be an expert both with his fists and the usual weapons common to the frontier.

The manner in which the Ranch King had addressed him on the morning when the quarrel with Mexican Mike had taken place rankled in his mind, and he had come to the determination to "go" for Dick Talbot on the first opportunity.

"All right!" the marshal exclaimed. "We three will try our luck with this Ranch King galoot. I will jest skip over and see how the thing is to be worked."

The Ranch King expressed his satisfaction when informed that his proposition had been accepted, and the arrangements for the fight were soon made.

It was understood that the strictest neutrality was to be observed both by Dick Talbot's men and the citizens during the fight.

The citizens were to be at liberty to advance to within a hundred yards of the hacienda, so as to be able to witness the fight, standing to one side though so as not to interfere with the contestants.

Talbot was to take his station at a certain point a hundred feet from the house; a hundred yards further on the three were to be grouped.

After getting into position the marshal was to ask: "Are you ready?" and upon the Ranch King's reply in the affirmative the fight was to begin.

Each man was to be provided with two revolvers, one in each hand, and to be at liberty to use one, or both, as he pleased.

"I reckon thar ain't many men w'ot kin make much of a fist at left-handed shooting," Livingstone remarked.

"No, as a rule, few men shoot with the left hand," Dick Talbot replied, but he did not think it necessary to post his foes as to what they might expect by telling them that he was able to shoot fully as well with his left hand as with his right.

The marshal returned and made known to the citizens the terms of the fight.

Then the three, who were to do battle, examined their weapons, for in a struggle like this, a want of precaution might cost a life.

When the three were ready an advance was made.

The citizens hurried forward eagerly to secure good positions, and when the three champions were in their places, the gates of the ranch opened; Dick Talbot made his appearance, a revolver in each hand, and walked leisurely to his post.

When he gained it, the marshal cried:

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, all ready!"

Immediately the three separated, and, when they were some twenty feet apart, charged upon the Ranch King.

CHAPTER XVII.

A DESPERATE ENCOUNTER.

THE three had arranged this maneuver while marching to their places. It was a clever dodge, and the citizens gave vent to loud "Ahs!" of astonishment when the movement was performed.

The idea was to attack the Ranch King from three separate points; no random shot would be able to do him service then.

Dick Talbot stood like a rock, as immovable as a statue, with his hands at the level of his

waist, until his foes were within a hundred and fifty feet of him; then, with the precision of a machine, both arms were raised and he took aim at the marshal, who was in the center, and Ben Perkins, the butcher, on the extreme right.

Anticipating that he was about to fire the three halted, acting as though under orders, and then they blazed away.

But it is an expert revolver shot, indeed, that can hit his man at a hundred and fifty feet, and the three bullets flew wide of the mark, none of them coming within a yard of the Ranch King, but as he dropped his hands to the level of his waist right after the discharge, without firing, the crowd came to the conclusion that he was hit and gave a shout.

"He's done for, I reckon!" cried one overwrought townsman.

"Oh, go 'long!" Clairborne exclaimed, "he is only playing with them!"

The shrewd, sharp-eyed gambler had penetrated the game of the sport.

He was trying to "rattle" his antagonists.

The three halted for a moment after firing to note the effect of their bullets, and when Talbot's arms dropped, they, too, for a few seconds fell into the error of thinking he was wounded, but when they saw that he kept his position, firm as a statue, and noticed the smile upon his lips, they understood their bullets had not harmed him, and they were somewhat puzzled as to why he was reserving his fire.

They glanced at each other, then Black Dan Dutton moved off a little more to the left, and Ben Perkins executed a similar maneuver to the right; then they advanced again, but this time more slowly.

Another fifty feet was covered and then up came Talbot's arms with wonderful swiftness; his antagonists halted immediately and tried to draw a bead on the Ranch King, but Talbot anticipated their fire, for he blazed away as soon as his pistols reached the level, apparently never troubling himself to take aim, but the reader who has followed Injun Dick's fortunes knows that he was a most marvelous "snap-shot," and could do as much execution if he fired the moment his pistol reached the level, as though he dwelt for a minute on his aim.

His revolvers were discharged so nearly together that but one report was heard.

The human targets were at his favorite range, an even hundred feet, and both his bullets told.

The marshal got a ball in the right shoulder which made him drop his right-hand revolver as though it had suddenly become red-hot; the brawny butcher was shot through the body; up went his hands, and then, with a groan, he pitched forward upon his face.

It was plain that he was out of the fight for good.

Both of the revolvers of the wounded men went off just after the bullets struck them, so the leaden missile of one went down into the ground and the other was wasted on the air.

Black Dan Dutton discharged his all right, but the double explosion of Talbot's revolvers had made him nervous, and his bullet did not come within six feet of the Ranch King's head, whistling high up in the air.

Then Talbot turned a little and gave the bully the benefit of a double discharge, but Black Dan Dutton's nerves forsook him just as the shots were fired, and he fell upon his knees thereby saving himself, for both of the Ranch King's bullets would have struck him if he had kept his upright position.

The tremor lasted but for a minute, and then the big fellow sprung to his feet, turned and fled toward Silveropolis as fast as his legs could carry him, amid the hoots of the crowd, who were terribly mortified at seeing one of their champions thus disgrace himself and his town.

The marshal kept his ground, although his wound was an extremely painful one, and completely deprived him of all use of his right hand.

His disgust at the craven behavior of Black Dan Dutton was intense.

"Come back, you infernal coward!" he yelled, as the bully raced across the prairie, but Black Dan Dutton fled with wonderful speed, his feet aided by the wings of fear.

"Say, Talbot, I want you to understand, I am not knocked out of this fight yet!" he exclaimed.

"Not satisfied, marshal?" the Ranch King inquired in his quiet way.

"No, sir, I still have the use of my left hand, although I am suffering the torments of the infernal regions; my shoulder feels as if there was a red-hot poker stuck into it, but I am able for you yet!"

"Livingstone, you are a good man, and after this display no one will ever doubt your game-ness, and so I don't want to kill you—or even to give you another wound, for you are badly enough off already."

"Oh, come now, you are only bluffing!" the marshal declared. "You are not sure of settling my hash, although you have got the best of the fight so far."

"Are you an expert shot with your left hand?" Talbot asked.

"No, I reckon I ain't," the marshal replied in

a disconsolate way. "I don't believe I ever fired a shot with my left hand in my life!"

"What chance then do you stand? Why, man, your life is at my mercy!" the Ranch King exclaimed. "Perhaps you have got the idea into your head that these shots of mine were just accidentally lucky ones."

"Oh, no, I reckon you kin handle your tools pretty well."

"Let me show you how well. Hold up your revolver, straight in the air, the barrel just above your shoulder."

The marshal complied.

"Crack!" went Talbot's right-hand revolver, and Livingstone dropped the weapon with an exclamation of pain.

"Durned if you didn't give me a regular electric shock!" he cried.

"I could just as well put the bullet through your brain," the Ranch King remarked.

"Wa-al, I reckon you could, and as that ain't anything of the hog about me, I will own up that I have got enuff. It is your fight, Talbot, and no mistake! I reckon you have given me a remembrance that will last one while. I s'pose I ought to be thankful, though, that I am not salted down for good like Perkins."

"I reckon he is not so badly hurt," Talbot remarked. "I didn't try to kill the man, but only to wound and disable him."

"Wa-al, I hope he ain't done for." And then the marshal turned to the crowd. "Gentlemen, the show is over, and I say, Doc Brown, jest take a look at my arm, will you?"

The citizens advanced, and while the most of them surrounded the marshal, some hurried to where Perkins lay.

The mayor and a few others came up to the Ranch King.

"I am very glad, Mr. Talbot, that this unpleasant business is settled," Plunkett declared.

"I can assure you, Mr. Talbot, that my voice was for peace from the beginning, but I was overruled."

"Well, I am sorry that the thing occurred," the Ranch King remarked. "But now that it is over, and the victory is mine, I assure you, Mr. Mayor, more strongly than ever, that I had no hand in the killing of the Maverick Man, and I should think after the exhibition of my skill you have seen to-day, you have convincing proof I am not the kind of man to shrink from a fight with any such fellow as Maverick Mike. If I had sought the man's life, I could easily have killed him in a fair fight without having to resort to the knife of the assassin."

"I will say frankly, Mr. Talbot, that it was my impression you were guilty, but now I am satisfied that that half-breed cowboy was so drunk he was not capable of knowing what was going on," the mayor declared.

"Yes, something was wrong about his testimony," the Ranch King remarked, dryly.

During this conversation, the doctor had succeeded in extracting the ball from the marshal's shoulder; it had passed clear through, and lay near the skin at the back.

"It is an ugly, painful wound, Livingstone, but not at all dangerous," Doc Brown remarked, as he bandaged it up.

"It hurts like blazes!" the marshal growled.

"Ah, well, you must expect these little things to happen if you go fooling around with revolvers," the doctor rejoined. And then he proceeded to look after the butcher.

As Talbot had said, Perkins was not seriously hurt. He had been shot in the side, and the bullet, striking against a rib, had glanced and passed out at the back.

"He is worth a dozen dead men!" Doc Brown exclaimed, and then proceeded to bandage the wound.

"I am very glad, Mr. Talbot, that this affair has not resulted in any serious damage!" the mayor declared. "But I am satisfied from what I have seen that these men may thank you for their lives. If you had desired you could have killed all three."

"Mr. Plunkett, I do not seek the life of any man," the Ranch King replied. "If it was a question of their lives or mine, then I should not hesitate to kill, of course."

"Certainly, and no one could blame you."

"I presume that now I may consider this matter settled?" the Ranch King asked.

"Oh, yes; we accepted your proposition, and Silveropolis is satisfied," the mayor replied.

"I am glad of it, for I don't want to feel that I am an outlaw with every man's hand against me. I am innocent of this crime, and one day it will be made plain to all."

"I feel sure of it, Mr. Talbot!"

Then the mayor shook hands with the Ranch King and took his departure.

Slowly the citizens with the wounded men made their way back to the camp, Talbot's wonderful prowess the theme of every tongue.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TALBOT'S SLEUTH-HOUND.

FROM the roof of the house, partially concealed behind one of the chimneys, Mrs. Talbot had witnessed the fight.

A true Western woman was she who was once known as Frisco Nell, and she did not shrink from witnessing an encounter of this

kind, particularly when one she loved was concerned therein.

She greeted her husband warmly when he entered the hacienda.

"I managed to get the best of them," Talbot said, as he seated himself in the cozy sitting-room which plainly bore the marks of a woman's cunning hand in its adornments.

"Yes; they were no match for you, and if you had willed you could easily have killed all three of them."

"True; but it was not my game to do that; I bore no one of the three any ill-will," the Ranch King observed. "The marshal is a good, game man, although obstinate and bull-headed. He thought he was doing his duty, and so boldly faced death. The other fellow, who made such good use of his legs, is merely one of the bullies of the town. He fancied that the odds of three to one insured a victory, and so he came into the fight expecting to pluck some easy laurels. Perkins, the butcher, has a grudge against me because I spoke pretty plainly to him the other day about buying stolen cattle. He too probably thought that with three to one it was a sure thing."

"Ah, they did not know the man they were to meet!" the wife exclaimed, with a glance at Talbot full of pride.

"Yes; I have had considerable experience in that line and must be considered a pretty old stager."

"The affair is settled now and you can go to Silveropolis without fear of trouble?"

"Oh, yes; the mayor says everything is all right, and I am glad of it too, for it would not be pleasant to be shut out of the only town for miles around that is worth visiting, and in order to prevent such a thing was the reason why I proposed to meet three of their men; if I had allowed them to go on and attack me here I should have had to kill a dozen or two of them, and then Silveropolis and I would never have been on good terms again."

"Dick, I have been thinking over this matter since you went out, and I have come to the conclusion that there has been a deliberate plot to take your life without endangering the men who engineered the scheme," Mrs. Talbot exclaimed, abruptly.

"Oh, yes, that is my idea; under the circumstances it is not possible to come to any other conclusion. My knife was stolen from my belt in the saloon, and then the Maverick Man was waylaid and killed with it. The thing was cunningly arranged. I had caught Mexican Mike with a beef he had stolen from me that morning, and had thrashed him in the presence of witnesses, so there were plenty to prove that there had been a quarrel between us; therefore, when the man was found dead, suspicion was at once directed to me, and the finding of my knife in the wound seemed conclusive proof that I was the man who had done the deed."

"But now the question is, what foe of yours arranged this scheme, which so nearly resulted in your death?" Mrs. Talbot asked.

"That is just what I have been puzzling about," the Ranch King replied, reflectively. "In such a case a man ought to be able to put his hand on the man, or men, at once, but I'll be hanged if I can!"

"It is the work of some foe, of course."

"Yes, there is no doubt about that, but for the life of me, I cannot think of the party. I have not had any trouble with any one for a long time, and therefore there is no reason for my death to be desired. The last difficulty was with Bernal's brigands, but that is a long time ago."

"And the brigand band no longer exists."

"True, and the last report I heard in regard to Bernal was that he lay in Guaymas jail under sentence of death, and he has probably been shot long ere this."

"But if by some chance he escaped death, and secured his liberty, he would be apt to try some such scheme as this," Mrs. Talbot remarked, thoughtfully.

"Yes, it is like a piece of Mexican work. The average Mexican is inclined to resort to under-hand means when he is not strong enough to meet his man openly."

"I did not think of Bernal or of his brigands," the Ranch King continued. "Some way, all thoughts of them had passed out of my mind."

"But do you not think it is probable that this mischief proceeds from some of the brigands?" Mrs. Talbot asked. "Even if Bernal is dead, executed by the Mexican authorities, some one of his band may be in this neighborhood, and is endeavoring to execute vengeance upon you for the part you took in destroying the brigand band and delivering the leader to the Mexican authorities."

"Yes, I believe you have hit upon the truth. Some one of the outlaw band is at the bottom of this matter, and do you know, Nell, I have always regretted that I gave Bernal up to the Mexicans; but they came upon me and requested that I should do so, right in the flush of victory, and as the brigand chief was reported to be so badly wounded that he was likely to die at any moment, I complied with the wish, for I knew he would have much better medical attention than I could procure for him. But when I

heard that his wounds had proved to be only slight ones, then I was sorry I had given the fellow up to the mercy of the men who had never been able to beat him in anything like a fair fight."

"He was not such a bad fellow for an outlaw," Talbot remarked, reflectively. "He had the instincts of a gentleman, although circumstances had forced him to become an outcast and a brigand."

"Oh, yes, he was no common ruffian, but for all that he had the ferocity of a tiger when roused, and though he endeavored to emulate the old-style outlaws, who robbed the rich and gave to the poor, yet he was a scourge to the country, and all along the frontier both Americans and Mexicans breathed more freely when his hand was destroyed."

"No doubt of that, and though he professed to wish to avoid violence when he could, yet, if resistance was offered to his demands, he never shrunk from bloodshed to gain his ends."

"Bernal may have escaped from the hands of the Mexican authorities," Talbot remarked. "Of course, in all cases of this kind, there is many a slip between the cup and the lip. Because the man was condemned to die, and the date of his execution fixed, that is no reason why he may not have succeeded in avoiding death."

"And even if Bernal is dead, some of his band may have taken the task of vengeance upon himself."

"We are on the right track!" the Ranch King exclaimed abruptly, as a sudden remembrance came to him. "I recollect now, this Maverick Man, Mexican Mike, was a member of Bernal's band, and when the trial of the outlaw chief took place he turned informer and saved his own life by betraying his comrades, and upon his testimony, chiefly, was Bernal and his men convicted. By killing the Maverick Man, and causing suspicion to rest upon me, thus putting my neck in danger, they dispatched two birds with one stone."

"Yes, yes, you have hit upon the truth, I am sure!"

"The half-breed cowboy, whose evidence so nearly got me hanged, is no doubt one of the old-time brigands; there is a strong probability that there are three or four in the scheme, for one man would not be likely to undertake it."

"I think your supposition is correct, and if you track this half-breed cowboy you will undoubtedly come upon the others."

"A sleuth-hound must be put upon the trail immediately. Mud Turtle is the man to undertake the task."

"Yes, you can depend upon him to ferret out the truth if it can be done by mortal man!" Talbot declared.

The Indian was summoned and the Ranch King made known to him his suspicions.

"You must disguise yourself like a peon—although you are rather too big to play the part of a tame Indian, yet, outside of that, you do it to the life—go to the Hotel de Sonora and get on the track of this half-breed cowboy, who calls himself Jo Cadoza. I don't think you will have any difficulty in finding him, for he makes his headquarters in that low Mexican dive. Find out all you can about the man, who his associates are and what he is doing in the town. If he is a genuine cowboy he will be in search of work, but if he is, as I suspect, one of the men who formerly belonged to the brigand band of Fernando Bernal, work will not trouble him much."

The Indian nodded his head with the air of a sage.

"Me go—me find 'um—you bet!"

"Let me see," observed Dick Talbot, reflectively. "We must arrange some mode by means of which we can communicate without danger of any one discovering it. If my suspicions are correct, there are three or four in league with this half-breed, and it will not do for us to be seen together."

"No, no—they see I fool 'um," the chief observed.

"Yes, and that would upset the whole thing. I will arrange to be in town every afternoon at about five o'clock, and I will take my horse to the hotel corral. You can easily manage to get to the corral before that time, and by entering from the rear will not be observed, unless some one follows you, and you must look out for that."

"Yes, yes, me keep eyes open."

"By pretending that you are pretty well soaked with liquor, if any one sees you enter or leave the corral, they will think you went there to sleep."

"Me fix 'um—all down but nine!" said the chief, in his sententious way.

"You will undoubtedly be able to get some information if this half-breed cowboy is not what he pretends to be, and I feel pretty certain that he is sailing under false colors."

"Mud Turtle smell 'um out!" the Indian declared, and then left the room to prepare for the task.

"It will not take long for the chief to discover the truth, and if I am indebted for this attack to any members of the old brigand band, I shall hold them to a bloody reckoning!" the Ranch King declared.

CHAPTER XIX.

TWO OF A KIND.

NEVER since the world began was there a man more thoroughly under the influence of fear than Black Dan Dutton when he so wildly fled from the scene of battle.

He heard not the jeers of the crowd; not one of the many torrents called forth by his cowardly behavior reached his ears. He was blind and deaf; all that he thought of was getting out of range of the Ranch King's deadly fire.

He kept up his headlong flight as long as he was able, and stopped not until so exhausted that he could run no longer.

By this time the swells of the rolling prairie hid from his sight the ranch, in front of which he had made such a terrible show of himself.

"I have made an awful bad break!" he mused, as he trudged along. "I reckon I won't be able to show my head in Silveropolis for a mighty long time. I don't know but wot I had better pull up stakes and travel on to some new town, 'cos I reckon arter this the boys will kinder make Silveropolis pretty hot for me."

When he reached the camp he went to the Hotel de Sonora, which was one of his favorite lounging-places, and confided to the landlord all that had occurred.

The landlord was a burly Mexican, who bore the name of Pedro La Cruz, but as this was rather too much for the boys to "tangle their tongues over," as they said, it was shortened into Big Pete, and the landlord was seldom called anything else.

Big Pete listened patiently to the tale, and then scoffed at the idea of quitting the town for a little thing like that.

"It is well known that you are a brave man!" he declared, with true Mexican flattery; "and what does it matter if on this one occasion you were seized with a sudden fright? The bravest man in the world may be expected to show the white feather at some critical moment. It is like an attack of the fever; it seizes upon a man without his knowing it, and comes so unexpectedly that it cannot be foreseen."

Black Dan Dutton felt a little comforted by this assurance.

"I s'pose I had better go up the gulch and keep shady for a few days, so as to give time for the thing to blow over," he remarked.

"Yes, that is a good idea," the landlord responded. "If you were here when the boys return, undoubtedly they would make it very uncomfortable for you with their taunts, but if you stay away for a few days the affair will blow over."

Acting on this idea, Black Dan went up to one of the mountain mines and secured work, and the camp saw him not for a week, although as soon as the men of the expedition returned they hunted all over town for him, for on the homeward march they had, in anticipation, enjoyed the sport they would have at the expense of the discomfited bully.

And when some of the boys talked pretty loudly in the Hotel de Sonora of what a coward Black Dan had proved himself to be, the landlord took them up pretty sharply.

"Oh, yes, he was a coward!" he exclaimed; "he volunteered to fight this Ranch King and stood up like a man to receive his fire until he saw both of his companions shot down and realized that there wasn't any chance for him, then he lost his head, as has happened to many a good man before him, and fled, panic-stricken, and all you brave men at once came out to take his place and fight the Ranch King, eh?"

The scoffers looked a little sheepish at being thus brought to book, and one sought to break the force of the attack by remarking:

"Wa al, no; I reckon none of us went into the thing, but if we had, you bet we would have stood up to the racket!"

"Oh, yes, of course!" Big Pete exclaimed, in a most sarcastic manner. "You were all dying to fight the Ranch King, but, somehow, you didn't do it. You all showed that you were brave men by holding back when you might have gone forward, and Black Dan Dutton was a coward because he volunteered to go into the fight, and then had sense enough to take to his heels when he found there was no chance for him to win."

"Wa al, we wouldn't have run if we had gone into it!" protested another.

"You wouldn't?" exclaimed Big Pete, in utter contempt. "Bah! I have a hundred dollars here which says that there is no five of you who dare to meet the Ranch King in a fight! Ay! I will put up five hundred against one!"

This bold banter put an end to all scoffing at Black Dan Dutton in the Hotel de Sonora, for, to use the old expression, as the men were not inclined to "put up," they were obliged to "shut up."

The landlord had been prompted to come to the defense of the absent bully, first, because he was a good customer, second, on account of the half-breed cowboy, Jo Cadoza, asking the host to speak a good word for him.

Big Pete and the half-breed were on extremely intimate terms, and to one of the miners who spoke in regard to the matter, the landlord explained that Cadoza was an old acquaintance, he having known him in Sonora years ago.

As Big Pete had predicted, when Black Dan Dutton ventured to make his appearance in the camp, very few taunts were hurled at him, and to the few that ventured to jeer at him, Black Dan, taking his cue from the landlord, replied:

"You didn't dar' to face him, none of you, nohow!"

This silenced his tormentors.

After a while the half-breed managed to get into conversation with Black Dan.

He took advantage of an opportunity when the saloon was deserted, with the exception of a drunken peon who was asleep in one corner, stretched out on a bench.

As a rule, the landlord did not allow this sort of thing, but as the peon had patronized the bar in the most liberal manner, and had displayed a buckskin bag well-filled with coin, not half of which he had spent, Big Pete refrained from turning him out lest he should take offense and go and spend the rest of his money in some other saloon.

The half-breed ordered a bottle of mescal, and invited Black Dan to sit down at a table at the extreme end of the room and help him to dispose of it.

The landlord brought the mescal and in an off-hand way said:

"Cadoza, I've a Mexican dollar which does not seem to be exactly right; you are a good judge of coins; come look at it and give me your opinion."

"Certainly; help yourself to the mescal, Dutton; I will be back in a moment," and then the half-breed followed the landlord to the bar.

Big Pete took the dollar out of the drawer, placed it in Cadoza's hand, and as the latter examined it, said in a low, cautious tone, but in a careless manner, so as not to excite suspicion:

"Are you going to talk business to Black Dan?"

"Yes."

"Well, be careful. Did you notice the tame Indian asleep in the corner?"

"I did."

"I think he is all right, but you can never tell about these devilish Indians; they are as cunning as foxes, and for a few dollars would betray their best friend."

"Who is the fellow—do you know anything about him?"

"No, except that he comes from Sonora, where he has been working on a ranch. He has a year's savings with him and comes here to get work in a mine, but he will not do any work while his money lasts."

"Yes, I see; the fellow seems to be harmless enough."

"True, but my experience is that there is no trust to be ever placed in a peon. This fellow when he laid down was drunk as he could get—could hardly talk, but for all that I would be careful to speak so that he cannot overhear what you say in case he should happen to wake up. He may be cunning enough, you know, to wake and yet pretend to sleep. It is my rule always never to trust one of these tame red devils."

"I will be careful," then in a louder tone the half-breed said: "The cash is all right, I think; I am sure I would take it quickly enough."

"Well, that was my belief, but I wanted to be sure."

Then Cadoza returned to the table; Black Dan had filled his glass with the potent Mexican liquor, and was sipping it as Cadoza resumed his seat.

The half-breed poured out a drink, and with a "here's to our better acquaintance," tossed it off at a swallow.

"Aha! that is the stuff!" he exclaimed. "That goes to the right place, eh?" and then he proceeded to refill the glasses.

"Yes, yes, it is good liquor."

"We ought to be friends, Señor Dutton, for you and I are in the same boat," the half-breed observed.

"How is that?" Black Dan asked.

"Speak lower," continued Cadoza. "It is as well that that drunken Indian in the corner should not overhear our conversation."

"Yes, that is true; I hate those tame redskins."

"So do I, they are treacherous devils. What I meant by saying that we are both in the same boat is that we both have cause to hate this Ranch King, Dick Talbot."

"Yes, curse him! I would like to shed his heart's blood!" exclaimed Black Dan Dutton fiercely, and he brought his clinched fist down upon the table with an energy that made the bottle and glasses dance.

"Softly, softly, not so loud!" said the half-breed, warningly.

"All right, I will be careful, but when I think how that accursed Ranch King made me skip I get almost crazy!"

"I don't blame you; it is only natural," the half-breed remarked. "In the future too I shall have to be on the lookout. It was my evidence that put the rope around his neck, you know, and I fancy Dick Talbot is not the kind of man to either forget or forgive an affair of that kind."

"You are right! The chances are a thousand to one that he will endeavor to be revenged upon you."

"The Ranch King is a good fighter, but I have known men as good as he come to grief."

"Ay, but the question is, how can it be worked?" asked Black Dan, catching eagerly at the idea.

"I have been thinking over the matter ever since the peace was patched up between the Ranch King and the townsmen," the half-breed explained. "I know that I am in danger, although Talbot has made no move to attack me, but I understand well enough that he is only waiting for a favorable opportunity, and when that comes, it will be either his life or mine."

"Yes, I don't doubt that."

"Now, I have a scheme in my mind by means of which Dick Talbot can be put out of the way, but I can't work it alone. I want some man like you to go in with me."

"It is a bargain!" Black Dan Dutton cried. "I will do it, for I am hungry for the blood of the Ranch King!"

Was it fancy, or did the eyelids of the tame Indian quiver?

CHAPTER XX.

THE HALF-BREED'S SCHEME.

"You are wise to go in with me!" the half-breed declared. "For you will never amount to anything in this town until you have wiped out the disgrace of your defeat, and as for myself, I understand well enough that sooner or later I will have to meet the Ranch King, for he will never forgive me for so nearly getting him hanged."

"You bet he won't!" the other exclaimed. "The first thing you know he will be howling for you to come up to the captain's office and settle!"

"Well, I am no slouch in a fight, yet I am not anxious to meet this Dick Talbot," the half-breed admitted.

"I don't blame you; the galoot is a lightning fighter, and no mistake!"

"But I shall never have any peace while I stay in this town until the matter is settled."

"You never said a truer word in your life, 'cos the Ranch King is likely to jump on you at any time."

"Yes, that is my idea, and that is what set me to work scheming how I could get a crack at him, for I think that when a man is threatened he is not wise if he does not strike the first blow."

"You kin bet high on that!"

"Now the plan I hit upon is a very simple one, but I think it will work; in order to carry it out, though, I need the aid of a man like yourself, who has cause to wish to be revenged upon the Ranch King."

"Wa-al, as far as that goes, I reckon you kin bet all the ducats you kin raise that thar ain't any man in this camp who is more anxious for to git a whack at him than I am," Black Dan Dutton declared.

"That was my calculation; and now my scheme is this: The boys have been running you, I suppose, about the show you made of yourself the other day?"

"You bet they have!" the bully declared, with a grimace. "It is jest nuts to the galoots to get the deadwood on me."

"The next man that says anything you must take up sharply by declaring that you are not afraid to meet the Ranch King in a fair fight, even if you did get rattled and lose your head the other day; the declaration will be doubted, of course; then you must say you are going to take the first opportunity to challenge Dick Talbot to a duel, for all you want is a fair show, and you will settle the Ranch King for good."

The bully looked at the other in an extremely doubtful way.

"Say! ain't you laying out a pretty hefty peppergram for me to carry out? I reckon I want to salivate the Ranch King in the worst kind of way, but I am mighty sart'in that I don't stand no chance to do it in a fair fight."

"Wait until you hear how I propose to arrange the matter," the half-breed replied.

"This vaunt of yours is certain to be carried straight to the Ranch King, for there are always plenty of meddlers about, glad of a chance to make trouble. Talbot will be sure to declare that he is ready to give you all the satisfaction you want."

"Yes, no doubt 'bout it! I reckon the galoot would jest as soon fight as eat," Black Dan remarked, with a shake of the head.

"His answer will come right back to you, for the men of the town will be anxious to see if you will dare to make your words good."

"Oh, yes, thar will be plenty of curs glad to see me back out, so they kin have a chance to poke more fun at me."

"When his reply is brought you will say that that is just what you want, and if the Ranch King will take the trouble to come to the first gulch above the town at seven o'clock on the following morning, you will be there to meet him, and you reckon to be able to show the town

that though you did run from the Ranch King on the prairie, yet on this occasion you will give him all the fight he wants."

"This is all right, but I ain't so sart'in 'bout gitting away with Talbot as to risk a picnic of this kind, and whar do you come in, anyway?" the bully asked.

"Do not be alarmed; it is not my game to have you fight the Ranch King," the half-breed replied. "It is my opinion that you would not stand much chance, and I most certainly would not advise you to risk a fight; I come in in this way:

"I shall be up on the hillside at a point which commands the road to the gulch, ambushed behind a pine with a Winchester rifle, and when Dick Talbot goes up the gulch to meet you I will put a ball through his heart!" and the half-breed sunk his voice to a whisper as he spoke the savage words.

A gleam of satisfaction came over the dark face of the bully.

"Yes, yes," he murmured, also lowering his voice, "the trick could be worked in that way."

"Most certainly; there isn't anything to prevent it. An old Indian trail leads along the hillside, and from the trail to the road in the gulch it is so rough and steep that only a goat, or a big-horned sheep could hope to scale it. In order to pursue me, after the shot is fired, the men will have to go back a quarter of a mile to where the trail leaves the gulch road, and that will delay the pursuit so much that I shall have ample time to escape."

"It is a bully plan!" Black Dan Dutton declared, exultingly. "But, hold on!" he continued, as an idea came to him. "Mebbe the crowd will git it into their noddles that I am mixed up in this hyer thing, and if they do, they will be apt to make it warm for me."

"Oh, no; how can you be connected with the man who fires the shot? And if any suspicion should arise, a prompt denial on your part would be apt to quell it; it will be impossible for any one to prove anything."

"That's true! Wa-al, old hoss, I am in with you, and I reckon I will work the trick so as to put the Ranch King in a hole this time."

The pair had been paying their respect to the liquor during the talk, and they finished the conversation and the bottle at the same time; then Black Dan Dutton took his departure.

CHAPTER XXI.

INTRAPPED.

The half-breed rubbed his hands gleefully together as the door closed after the bully.

"Aha," he muttered, "the scheme works to a charm. This dull-headed fool will lure the Ranch King into the net, and the bullet from my rifle will put an end to his career; then, and not until then, will my vengeance be satisfied."

"If I could arrange the affair exactly as I would like to have it though, I would not kill the Ranch King outright; I would much prefer to make him a prisoner, and force him to undergo some of the torture which fell to my lot in Guaymas jail; I would joy to make him endure such anguish that he would cry out for death, and welcome it as a glad relief. But as I cannot form any plan to capture the Ranch King I must content myself with killing him."

Then the half-breed rose and approached the bar.

Big Pete was not visible, and the half-breed hesitated and looked around in surprise, for he had not noticed the landlord's departure.

Then Big Pete rose into sight behind the bar; he had been squatting on a low stool, and so had been concealed from view.

"I thought you had gone out, and I wondered at it too, for I did not notice that you had left the saloon."

"No, I was just taking a rest, for I was up late last night. Have a drink with me."

The half-breed looked surprised at the invitation.

"Take one; it will do you good!" the landlord urged. "And wake up the tame Indian so he can have a bowl. His throat must be as dry as an ash-heap by this time!"

The half-breed understood now that the landlord had some purpose in view, so he complied with the request.

It was no easy job to wake the peon, for he was fast in slumber's chain.

At last the half-breed got him on his feet and succeeded in making him comprehend that there was a drink waiting for him.

"Ugh, good!" exclaimed the fellow, still under the influence of liquor, as he made his uncertain way to the bar.

"Oh, yes, this is the stuff to set the blood dancing in a man's veins!" Big Pete remarked, as he pushed the bottle toward the peon.

The tame Indian filled a glass full to the brim with the fiery fluid, and then tossed it off without even winking.

The landlord and the half-breed only took half the quantity, and drank theirs more leisurely.

Then the peon, whose brain was evidently still muddled by the large quantity of liquor which he had previously drank, took out a dollar and pushed it over the counter to the landlord.

"More—odder drink!" he said with thickened tongue.

"Oh, never mind the money!" Big Pete exclaimed. "You have been a good customer. Have another one with me," and then he pushed the dollar back toward the peon, but miscalculated the distance and the coin fell on the floor.

The peon stooped, slowly, and like a man who was not sure of his balance, to pick it up.

The moment he had got on a level with the bar, Big Pete, with a sand-club which he kept on a shelf under the counter, in company with a brace of revolvers, dealt the tame Indian a most tremendous blow on the head with all the force of his powerful arm.

Down went the peon, like the ox under the blow of the butcher, rendered insensible by the stroke.

"Quick! secure the door so as to keep any one from entering!" the landlord exclaimed.

"What on earth did you do that for?" cried the half-breed, as he hastened to comply with the landlord's request.

There was a stout bar to the door, and when this was put in place the portal was securely barred.

Both door and window were provided with curtains, so it was not possible for any one without to look into the saloon.

"The fellow is a cursed spy!" Big Pete explained, as the half-breed returned to the side of the insensible man. "There is a hole in the end of the counter, so that when I sat on the stool, with my eye to it, I was able to watch him without his suspecting it. I thought I saw his eyelids move when you and Black Dan sat down, and that made me suspect he might be a spy, and that his drunkenness was assumed, although, to do the fellow justice, he drank liquor enough to intoxicate two men, let alone one."

"Yes, yes, I see."

"So I made up my mind to watch him without his being able to suspect that I had my eyes on him, and while you were talking I became satisfied he was only pretending sleep."

"Aha, the fellow was trying to listen, eh?"

"Yes, I am satisfied of it, and that is why I had you get him up to the bar. I determined to lay him out as soon as I could get an opportunity."

"But what object could the fellow have?" the half-breed asked. "Do you think he recognized me?"

"I should not be surprised. He comes from Mexico, you know."

"Is that true?"

"Yes."

"The chances are great, then, that he knows me, and seeing me here in disguise, his curiosity led him to attempt this trick; he was anxious to find out what game I was up to, and then he could line his pockets well by betraying me."

"That is it! but I have spoilt his scheme!"

"What will you do with him now?"

"Roll him down into the cellar where we will gag and bind him, so we can examine the rascal at our leisure."

"How do you get into the cellar?" asked the other, looking around for the entrance.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the landlord, "that is a little secret of my own. The fellow is right at the entrance now!"

Then Big Pete touched a spring, which was under the counter, and a trap-door, some four feet long by three wide, opened in the floor, right in front of the bar, the door so skillfully arranged that its existence would never be suspected unless a careful search was made.

"That is a good idea," the half-breed remarked.

"Yes; it is right handy once in a while."

Then, coming from behind the counter, the landlord assisted in carrying the insensible peon down into the cellar.

"What do you propose to do with him?" the half-breed asked, when the two arrived at the foot of the ladder which led to the cellar.

"There is an old motto that dead men tell no tales!" Big Pete replied, grimly. "The fellow has about a hundred dollars in his bag, I should think, and in my time I have settled many a man for less money than that."

"That is true; and one tame Indian more or less will not count."

"The fellow is half-dead now, I think, unless he has a skull like an ox, for I gave him a blow which would have finished an ordinary man!" the landlord exclaimed.

"A knife-thrust will make the matter certain," the half-breed suggested.

"Oh, do not fear that I shall take any chances," Big Pete replied.

Just at this point there came a series of violent knocks at the saloon-door, followed by a chorus of rough voices demanding admission, coupled with the threat that if the door was not speedily opened the party would kick it in, and they gave force to the threat by a savage attack on the door.

"I must hurry up at once!" Big Pete exclaimed. "That is a party of miners from up the gulch, and the roughest gang that comes to the camp. They will surely break in the door if I do not hasten. This fellow will not get over

this crack for a while, and if he does, he cannot get out for I will remove the ladder."

Then the pair ascended to the saloon again and drew up the ladder by means of which access was gained to the cellar.

Big Pete closed the trap and made haste to open the door to the clamorous crowd without.

They were the miners from the Rough and Ready Mine up the gulch, and they prided themselves upon being a rough and ready crowd.

They were all under the influence of liquor and in a mood to be ugly if they were interfered with.

They made a much longer stay than Big Pete had anticipated, having taken into their heads to "chuck dice" for the drinks, and it was fully an hour before they departed.

The landlord and the half-breed were on pins and needles during the latter part of the time, for the thought had come to them that they had neglected to remove the peon's weapons in their haste to admit the miners, and if the fellow was armed, and the chances were great that he was, and had recovered from the effects of the blow, he might make a desperate fight for his life.

After the miners departed the pair hastened to bar the door, then, revolvers in hand, they opened the trap and peered down into the darkness.

They feared that they would discover the peon crouched in a corner, prepared to make a desperate struggle for his life, although, as a rule, the tame Indians are not fighters.

But to their utter astonishment no sign of the man could they discover.

Big Pete lit a lantern and swung it into the trap-door opening so that all the dark corners of the cellar were made light.

No peon was in the place, though.

In a hurry the ladder was brought and the two descended, anxious to learn the mystery of the fellow's disappearance.

It was quickly revealed.

By the aid of a knife the tame Indian had dug a passage through the earth at the rear of the saloon and so escaped.

"Did I not tell you that these miserable peons are like foxes?" the landlord exclaimed.

"Well, it doesn't matter," the half-breed rejoined. "I spoke so low that he could not have overheard me, and so will not be able to interfere with my scheme."

"If he recognized, he may denounce you."

"I am through with this disguise and now the half-breed cowboy will disappear," the other replied as they ascended again to the saloon.

CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE GULCH.

BLACK DAN DUTTON lost no time in carrying out the programme which the half-breed had arranged.

He sauntered into the Silver Ship, his first appearance there since the disgraceful show which he had made of himself.

The old landlord, Skipper Bill, took it upon himself to make some fun for the crowd at Dutton's expense, but Black Dan "would not have it," to use the common expression.

"I was rattled and lost my head, and I ain't the fust good man who has been caught in that fix," he declared. "But I am all right now, and if any man in this camp thinks he kin climb me, why, he is jest welcome to wade in as soon as he please, and the quicker he does the better I will like it."

"Ah, you are only shooting off yer mouth now so as to hear yerself talk," one of the bystanders suggested.

"Yes, if the Ranch King was hyer I reckon nobody would hear a peep outen yer, Black Dan Dutton!" another one exclaimed.

"I am a-talking to the Ranch King as well as to any of the rest of you. I don't leave out any man in the camp!" the bully declared. "I want you to understand, boys, notwithstanding that leetle affair t'other day, I am jest as big a chief as thar is in the town, and I don't bar no one, no matter w'ot his color or his country is, black, white, yaller or red, it is all one to me! Mexican, Injun, nigger or white man, Ranch King or any other kind of a galoot, I'm his mutton, if he wants to try it on!"

This bold defiance astonished the crowd, and for a moment they stared, amazed, at the sweeping nature of the challenge.

"Oh, it is all very well for you to talk, Dutton, when the Ranch King ain't hyer to answer your hail!" the landlord exclaimed. "But may I be keel-hauled for a lubberly duffer if I don't believe that if the Ranch King war to show his figure-head inside of this hyer cabin, you would up anchor, clap on all sail, and run for deep water as though you reckoned the Flying Dutchman was arter yer!"

"That is jest the chance I am looking for!" Black Dan Dutton exclaimed, assuming an attitude of defiance.

"You don't mean to say that you are anxious to lock horns with the Ranch King!" cried one of the bystanders.

"That is my platform, and don't you forget it!" the bully retorted. "Don't ary one of you galoots make any mistake now. 'Cos I made a

bad break the other day is no reason why I won't stand up to the rack and take my fodder like a man now. The galoot that I am spoiling to wade into and whale until he thinks that a grizzly bar is arter him, claws and all, is the Ranch King, Dick Talbot!"

At this moment the Ranch King entered the saloon, just in time to hear his name pronounced.

"Dick Talbot is here—what is wanted?" the rancher asked.

There was a general start at this, and quite a striking tableau was framed.

Then perceiving that all in the place were gazing at Black Dan Dutton, who had struck an attitude in the middle of the saloon, Dick Talbot guessed that it was the bully who had been making free with his name.

There was a dead silence after Dick Talbot's unexpected appearance, and for all Black Dan Dutton had nerved himself to meet just such an ordeal as this, yet the sudden entrance of the sport disconcerted him.

"Maybe I was mistaken, but I certainly thought I heard my name mentioned," the Ranch King remarked, finding that no one was inclined to speak.

"Wa-al, I reckon you wasn't far wrong," Black Dan Dutton replied, finding the use of his tongue at last. "I s'pect a galoot 'bout my size was doing a leetle chinning 'bout you."

"I thought I didn't make any mistake, for my ears seldom deceive me," Dick Talbot observed in his cool and easy way. "And may I ask how it was that my name came to be mentioned?"

Every eye in the room was fixed upon the big fellow, and curiosity was on tip-toe to see how he would act, for there were few there who believed he would be as good as his word, and dare to face the Ranch King, now that he had the chance.

"Wa-al, Mister Talbot, the boys were kinder trying to poke a leetle fun at me on account of the bad break I made the other day, and when any game of that kind is tried on a galoot 'bout my size, it makes me wrath, and so I jest ups and tells 'em that it don't make a bit of difference, even if I did show the white feather t'other day, I am as big a chief as thar is in the town, and I ain't afeard to meet any man in the camp, bar none!"

"Quite a warlike declaration," the Ranch King remarked, considerably puzzled by this affair.

Talbot considered himself to be about as good a judge of men as could well be found, and if any one had asked his opinion of Black Dan Dutton, he would have replied that his bark was much more to be dreaded than his bite, yet now the fellow was manifesting a disposition to pick a quarrel with him, for there was no mistaking his intention.

"Yes, siree! I'm a good man, Mister Ranch King, if I did git rattled, and made a holy show of myself the other day, but sich an accident is likely to happen to the best of men, I reckon, but I'm all right now, and ready for business!"

"Oh, you are not satisfied then with the little experience that you had the other day?"

"No, siree, not by a jugful!"

"Well, I suppose I will have to accommodate you, for I see that you are spoiling for a fight, and I am not the man to refuse satisfaction when it is demanded of me."

"That is w'ot I want, satisfaction, you bet! I am jest a-pining for it!" the big fellow declared. "I want to redeem myself in the eyes of this hyer town. I want to show the boys that I am jest as big a chief as thar's in it!"

"As far as I am concerned, I am willing to give you every chance in the world."

"I reckon you would!" Black Dan Dutton declared. "You cut my comb the other day, but I am willing to bet all my ducats that you can't do it ag'in."

"We can tell that better after the picnic is over," Dick Talbot replied, more and more astonished at the way the other was holding his ground, for at first he had thought that Dutton could not be in earnest, but was only blustering a little, so as to recover some of his lost prestige, and that he had no real intention of fighting.

"Well, sir, I'm your man for a good squar' fight; a fair field, no favor, and may the best galoot win!"

"I will accommodate you, although I am not anxious to fight you, or any other man, for I am not one of the kind who goes around filling the air with boasts of how big a chief I am, but if any fellow in the town is unhappy because he can't make people believe he is a greater warrior than I, then I am quite ready to give him a chance to prove it to all the world."

"That is w'ot I want—a chance! That is jest w'ot I am a-hungering for!" Black Dan Dutton exclaimed.

"I'm your man! How will you have it—when and where?"

"W'ot I am arter is a good squar' fight, you know!"

"Yes; I understand that."

"A reg'lar kind of a fight—a sort of a duel."

"I see: no saloon brawl or street contest—no shooting on sight."

"No, sir-ee! I want everything according to Hoyle!"

"Well, I am agreeable; that suits me."

"S'pose we say revolvers?"

"Revolvers it is."

"A pair apiece, and no other we'pons?"

"Yes."

"To-morrow morning, up the first gulch, at seven o'clock?"

The Ranch King looked at the other intently for a moment, for the idea had occurred to him that there was some trick about this matter; but Black Dan Dutton stood the scrutiny without flinching, having nerved himself to meet such an emergency.

"To-morrow morning, up the first gulch, eh?" the Ranch King remarked, reflectively.

"That is what I said—but if you are skeered to come up to the scratch—" the bully observed, in a taunting way.

"Oh, come down now! None of that kind of talk, you know, or we will not wait for to-morrow, but settle the matter right here!" Dick Talbot observed, sharply. "You know well enough that I am not afraid to meet any man that ever stood in your shoes; but why put the thing off until to-morrow—why not settle it to-day?"

"'Cos I've got some business that I want to arrange, and I can't fix it until to-night," the bully replied. "I want to fix my affairs up so that if I kick the bucket in this hyer fight everything will be all right. I want you to understand, Mister Talbot, that I am going in for blood this time, and arter we git at it thar'll be one or both on us w'ot won't walk off arter it is over!"

Talbot was surprised at the courage that the other was displaying, a surprise shared by every one in the saloon, for, notwithstanding he was a big, powerful fellow, Black Dan Dutton had always been regarded as being more of a boaster than a fighter.

The cause that the bully gave was reasonable enough, and although Talbot fancied that there was some scheme back of it at first, yet, upon reflecting over the matter, he came to the conclusion that the man had been spurred on by the taunts leveled at him to make a desperate effort to redeem his character as a warrior.

"All right; I am in no hurry, although, as a rule, I like to get little matters of this kind off my mind as soon as I can," the Ranch King remarked. "In the first gulch, to-morrow morning at seven o'clock, will suit me, and I will be on hand."

"All right, I will be thar, and I am in for blood, I kin tell you!"

Then a sudden idea occurred to Talbot.

"Is this meeting to be a private one? for if so, I reckon we can't work it after this open disclosure of our plans?" the Ranch King said.

The notion had come to him that, possibly, the bully depended upon a gang to aid him; yet, if this was the case, arranging the meeting in a public saloon was a decided mistake.

"Nary private!" Black Dan Dutton replied. "The hull town kin come and look on for all I keer!"

And as the camp of Silveropolis was partial to "picnics" of this sort, it was safe to say that, after this public settlement of the details of the duel, there would be few men in the town who would not contrive to be present on the ground.

"It makes no difference to me; the more the merrier," Dick Talbot asserted.

"I don't bear you any malice, you know, Mister Talbot," the bully said, with an assumption of great dignity, "but this hyer camp ain't big enuff to hold two sich chiefs as you and me, and one of us has got to quit."

"Yes, I understand; if you can't be the first man in Rome, you are not willing to be the second!"

"You bet! when you say that, you hit me exactly whar I live! Wa-al, so-long, I'll see you to-morrow and do my best to put you in a condition for planting."

And Black Dan Dutton departed.

Then the saloon became like unto the scene when Babel's Tower was raised.

Every man in the room was trying to talk at the same time, and the theme was the astounding display of courage made by the bully.

"Would you have believed it?"

"I didn't think he had it in him!"

"He's game, you bet!"

"A durned fraud; he won't be thar!"

"All bluff!"

"He'll be a hundred miles away in the morning!"

"No sich thing—he's game, I tell yer!"

And the discussion became so violent that it threatened to result in a general row, but Skipper Bill quelled the disturbance by producing an enormous pair of revolvers and threatening to blow "the daylight outen the hull crowd," if they didn't keep still.

The Ranch King took advantage of the confusion to retreat.

He made his way to the corral, for it was about the time when he arranged to meet Mud Turtle, but the Indian was not there, and after loitering in the neighborhood of the corral for nearly an hour without being gratified by the

sight of the red sleuth-hound, the Ranch King came to the conclusion that he would not wait longer, so, mounting his horse, he set out for his ranch.

Although he had little fear in regard to the issue of the duel in which he was to engage on the morrow, for he had not a particularly good opinion of either the skill or the courage of Black Dan Dutton, yet, as a prudent man, he was about to arrange his affairs as though he feared he might fail in the coming fight.

To his wife he explained all that had occurred, and, to his surprise, the sawed-witted woman immediately declared her belief that there was some trick about the matter.

"That fellow is an arrant coward at heart!" she exclaimed. "If he was not he never would have fled as he did in the prairie fight the other day."

"Well, I had a suspicion that he was not honest in his challenge," the Ranch King admitted. "But upon looking the matter over I don't exactly see how any trick can be worked."

"There is some trickery connected with the affair, you can depend upon it," Mrs. Talbot asserted, positively. "And from the fact that you cannot at once detect what it is, it seems to me to be a piece of work that you will have to be on your guard against."

"If I were you I would take a strong party of your men with you."

"Yes, I thought of taking that precaution."

"From what you say it is certain that the greater part of the town will be on the ground to witness the fight, so the presence of your friends will not excite any remark."

"Oh, no; there cannot be any objection to their coming. By the way, has Mud Turtle returned?"

"No, I have not seen him since he went away."

"Strange! he did not keep his appointment with me in the town, but I suppose that indicates he has struck a trail, and being intent upon following it, has not been able to get back to the town."

Mrs. Talbot thought this was probable, and so the subject was dismissed.

Early next morning, with six of his best men, the Ranch King started to keep his appointment.

As the party rode through Silveropolis they noticed that the town seemed almost deserted.

"They have all gone up into the gulch so as to be on hand for the fight, I reckon," the Ranch King remarked, when Tom Martin, the chief of the cowboys, who rode by his side, called attention to the fact.

Sure enough! when the party got well into the gulch, they saw that at the upper end of it the ground was black with people.

"This beats a circus all hollow!" Dick Talbot remarked.

Hardly had the words left his lips when a rifle-shot broke the stillness of the air, startling the crowd, who were only a few hundred feet away.

CHAPTER XXIII. ON THE HILLSIDE.

THE time for the duel had been fixed at seven, as the reader will remember, but in order to be on hand, and secure good places to witness the fight, the men of Silveropolis began to gather in the gulch by half-past six.

Black Dan Dutton, attended by three of his chums, made his appearance about twenty minutes to seven, and, taking a seat on a rock in the upper part of the gulch, made a great ado in regard to seeing that his weapons were in perfect working order, and the bystanders, watching him with the greatest interest, whispered that he was "in for blood sure!"

At just about the time that the bully was going through his maneuvers, high up on the hillside, on the old Indian trail, a man was creeping cautiously along, taking advantage of every bush, tree and rock to screen him from the view of the men in the gulch beneath.

An Indian warrior, apparently, was this man, for he wore the prairie garb of buckskin, his face was copper-colored in hue and he wore the full war-paint of the red brave when on the trail of blood.

In the hollow of his arm he carried a Winchester rifle, a broad-bladed, keen-edged scalping knife, together with a brace of revolvers, was in the girdle of untanned leather which confined his waist.

The warrior made his devious way along the hillside until he arrived at a little clump of pine-trees which was situated on a knoll, getting out from the hillside in such a way as to command a view of the entire gulch.

A gleam of satisfaction appeared on the dusky face of the chief as he caught sight of this group of pines.

Cautiously he made his way to it, and stopped in a nook between two of the trees.

There were four of the pines, growing in a sort of irregular triangle and in the center, at the point of the triangle, was an opening about a foot wide, and by peering through this the warrior could see the whole of the gulch.

Beyond the pines was a broad, grassy shelf,

extending some twenty feet out, and then the hill dipped precipitately until it reached the level land of the gulch, five hundred feet below.

There was a loose, round boulder near at hand, and the painted chief rolled it into the middle of the pines and placed the stone in the opening between the trees in the center.

Then he knelt down, rested the barrel of his rifle upon the rock, and sighted it down into the gulch.

An exclamation of satisfaction came from his lips; the arrangement was perfection itself.

Then this dusky-hued fighting-man, high up on the hillside, followed the example of the white bully in the gulch below, and made a careful inspection of his weapon.

It did not take long for him to satisfy himself that it was in perfect order, and then he turned his attention to the people, streaming in to the gulch—the men anxious to be spectators at the coming fight.

The citizens were all on the ground before seven o'clock, and then just five minutes previous to the hour Talbot made his appearance, accompanied by his cowboys, as related in our last chapter.

The moment the Ranch King came in sight, the man in buckskin on the hillside prepared for action.

Kneeling down behind the rock, he rested his rifle upon it and trained it upon a point which Talbot must pass.

Fortune seemed to favor this man, who had evidently placed himself in ambush that he might become an assassin, for the Ranch King was riding on the side of the gulch nearest to where the rifleman lurked, so that Tom Martin, who was riding by Talbot, did not shield him as he would have done had he been on the other side.

Talbot was within ten feet of the point where he would be exposed to the deadly bullet.

Only a few moments more and the life of the Ranch King would not be worth a pin's fee, if the man in ambush was anything of a marksman, and he must be a bad shot indeed who could fail to hit so large a target as a mounted man at so short a distance.

With the glare of a demon in his eyes, the painted rifleman glanced along the shining tube, his finger on the trigger, all ready to send the death-dealing ball on its errand.

Five steps more and the muzzle of the rifle would be leveled full at Dick Talbot's heart.

The assassin crouched in ambush to surprise his prey; little recked he that a foe was steadily approaching to surprise him.

And just when he fancied that the life of the Ranch King was at his mercy, the man who had been steadily tracking him, moving when he moved, stopping when he stopped, sprung, with a mighty bound, upon him.

The rifle was discharged, for the rifleman's finger being on the trigger, the shock of the assault caused him to discharge the weapon, and the bullet, with which the assassin fondly hoped to take the life of the Ranch King, went whistling high up in the air.

The report of the shot caused all eyes to be directed to the hillside, and a strange sight the wondering spectators in the gulch below beheld.

Out from the shelter of the clump of pines to the grassy open space below came two men, locked together, engaged in a fierce struggle, for, although the ambushed assassin was taken completely by surprise, yet he made a desperate resistance, and being a well-formed, muscular fellow, the struggle was a severe one.

But his assailant was far too powerful for him, even if he had not gained the advantage of the surprise.

The new-comer was an unusually big fellow, dressed like a Mexican cowboy, excepting that on his feet he wore the moccasins of the red-man, and this was why he had been able to get right in the rear of the rifleman without the latter having any suspicion that any one was in the neighborhood.

The face of the assailant, though, was fully as dark as the visage of the dusky chief whom he had surprised, and the men in the gulch below, noting this, concluded that he was as much Indian as Mexican.

Talbot and his party halted the moment the report of the rifle broke the stillness of the gulch and like the rest gazed with intense interest at the struggle on the hillside.

It did not last but a few moments though, although the surprised man made desperate exertions to free himself from the clutch that his assailant had fastened upon him, but the big fellow stuck to him like a leech.

He forced him to the ground and held him there, squatting on his back like a large toad, despite the strenuous efforts of the other to turn; then producing a raw-hide he bound the wrists of the painted assassin together behind his back, although the prisoner tried his best to prevent it from being done.

The wrists being bound, the captor threw a loop over the ankles and soon had them tightly bound together, so that the other was completely helpless.

After this, taking his prisoner by the shoulders, he turned him over, dragged him to the

bowlder, which the other had placed between the pines, propped him up against it in a sitting position, so he could command a view of the gulch, then sat down by his side and gazed down into the valley as though he too was anxious to enjoy a sight of the fight which had been arranged to take place there.

The spectators below were astounded.

The rifle-shot and the struggle which had followed it had been unexpected and startling enough, and now this action of the conqueror was as strange as the previous incidents, and they could not understand the strange affair.

It was no mystery though to the Ranch King.

"Oho, boys! do you recognize the fellow in the Mexican rig?" he exclaimed.

The cowboys took a good look.

"You bet!" Tom Martin cried. "I'm a Dutchman if it ain't our Indian, Mud Turtle!"

The cowboy was right.

The brawny conqueror was the Blackfoot chief, Talbot's pard, Mud Turtle.

CHAPTER XXIV. THE FIGHT.

"I BEGIN to think I understand this little business!" Talbot exclaimed, with a smile of contempt. "It was a mystery as to how this Black Dan Dutton managed to muster courage enough to challenge me to a fight, but it is explained now. It was a trick to get me into the gulch so that I might be assassinated by this man concealed on the hillside."

"I reckon you are right," Tom Martin remarked. "And if it had not been for Mud Turtle the fellow would have plugged you, sure."

"Yes, the Indian has saved my life; there is no doubt about that. And now that the trick has failed, I have a curiosity to see how this bully will face the music."

"The internal scoundrell!" the cowboy exclaimed, excitedly. "You ought not to give him a chance for his life, but kill him without mercy!"

"Oh, he will lie out of it, of course, and swear that he had no hand in the matter."

"Yes; but I reckon that he will not be able to get many people to believe such a yarn!" Tom Martin cried, indignantly.

"We will soon see what he has to say for himself," the Ranch King replied.

Then the party went on.

Although Black Dan Dutton knew that a man was lurking somewhere on the hillside for the purpose of killing Dick Talbot, yet he was as much surprised as any one by what occurred.

The moment he saw Talbot approaching up the gulch he commenced rehearsing in his mind the defense which he should make if any of the crowd charged him with being in league with the unknown assassin after the Ranch King was killed by his bullet.

And as Talbot came on, the bully, still seated on the bowlder, pretending to be busy with his weapons, listened intently for the sound of the shot which was to announce the doom of the Ranch King.

And when the shot came he sprung to his feet and glared at Dick Talbot, expecting to see him reel in the saddle and then tumble to the earth, cut down by the merciless ball.

But to his amazement the Ranch King was not harmed by the shot.

Then, like the rest, he gazed at the hillside and beheld the struggle which ended in the complete overthrow of the half-breed, who had got himself up like an Indian chief in order to disguise his identity.

For a moment after the fight ended, the bully stood staring up at the hillside with his mouth open like a man in a maze.

In truth he was utterly dumfounded. This entirely unexpected event acted upon him for the moment like a stroke of paralysis, utterly benumbing his senses.

The ingeniously-planned scheme, which was surely to compass the death of the Ranch King, had failed, and not only failed, but the half-breed was captured, for that the supposed Indian was the cowboy Black Dan felt sure, although it was possible the half-breed had hired some Indian brave to commit the murder, but the bully did not believe that it was so, and now he must meet Dick Talbot in single fight—face the man whom he dreaded more than any five, or even ten men in the town.

The cold perspiration stood upon the forehead of the big fellow.

He was so bewildered by this unexpected turn of affairs that his brain was in a whirl; it refused to act, and a wild desire arose to throw down his weapons and seek safety in flight, just as he had fled from the prairie fight.

The voice of the Ranch King roused him from his abstraction.

"Well, Mr. Black Dan Dutton, your little trap to lay me out without having to take the trouble to fight me has not succeeded!" Dick Talbot exclaimed.

"What do you mean?" growled the bully, making desperate endeavors to throw off the fear which was weighing so heavily upon his soul, and face his opponent like a man.

"Oh, come, now! it is of no use for you to

profess ignorance. I understand the game as well as though I had planned it!" the Ranch King cried. "You challenged me to a duel up in this gulch so as to get a chance to assassinate me. Your man was up yonder on the hillside all ready to kill me when I came within range, but the thing didn't work just as it ought to have done, so you will have to fight me, after all."

Black Dan Dutton glanced around him for a moment like a hunted animal endeavoring to escape; all the spectators had gathered around the two, and the bully judged from the expressions upon their faces that they believed the charge which the Ranch King made to be a true one.

Then the desperation of despair took possession of the big fellow. He was cornered, and even the cowardly wolf when brought to bay will fight.

"I don't know nothing 'bout the thing!" he declared. "And if you think I am atead to meet any man of your size you are jest making the biggest kind of a mistake!" Black Dan Dutton blustered, striving by big words to conceal the terror which was in his soul.

"I am glad that you are going to come up to the scratch, but under the circumstances I don't see what else you could do, unless you are willing to be proclaimed a sneak of the first water," Talbot answered, tartly.

"I'm no sneak, I'll have you to know," the other retorted. "And I reckon that afore we git through with this picnic you will have to own up that I am as good a man as you ever faced!" the bully cried, with a swagger.

Like the boy who whistles when passing along a lonely road at night to keep his courage up, so Black Dan Dutton was striving by means of big words to cheat himself into the belief that he was really not afraid of his opponent.

"You are a black-hearted scoundrel and a miserable coward to boot, I reckon!" the Ranch King exclaimed, contemptuously. "I am perfectly certain that you did not intend to meet me in a fair fight, and that your sole object in bantering me into this duel was to get me into this gulch so that your tool, concealed on the hillside, would have a chance to kill me with a rifle shot without my being able to defend myself; the thing has slipped up, though, and now you will have to face the music."

"You lie, darn you!" howled Black Dan Dutton, working himself up into a sudden fury, and he essayed to cock the revolver which he had in his hand.

The Ranch King's weapons were in his holsters at his belt, and, apparently, there was a chance for the bully to take him at a disadvantage, and so the fellow was quick to improve it.

He cared not whether his action would be considered fair or foul, for he felt that if he did not secure some such advantage over his antagonist his life would not be worth an hour's purchase.

The moment that the motion was made, the crowd, which surrounded the two, only a couple of yards away, retreated precipitately, a dozen or so tumbling to the earth in their haste to get out of the range of fire.

Apparently, Black Dan Dutton had scored a point.

Dick Talbot had dismounted upon coming up to the bully, and the two were not over six feet apart.

But the Ranch King had been in too many affairs of this kind to allow himself to be caught napping—too old a stager to permit any common, ordinary ruffian to get a shot at him by being the quickest on the "draw."

And, therefore, while it was not apparent that he was prepared for war—and this led Black Dan Dutton to make the attempt to secure by foul means what he feared he could not get by fair—yet Dick Talbot was all ready, and the eyes of his adversary warned him of the attack before the attempt was made.

His left hand was thrust carelessly in the pocket of his trousers, and as the bully proceeded to cock his weapon, out came the hand with wonderful quickness and in it was a small, double-acting revolver.

It was done like a flash, and just as Black Dan Dutton got the hammer of his weapon raised, the sharp crack of Talbot's six-shooter sounded on the air.

The bully threw up his hands, staggered back and then went down all in a heap.

The fight was over, and again the Ranch King had laid out his man.

CHAPTER XXV.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

THE affair was settled so quickly that it was over almost before the crowd knew that it had begun.

In fact, the most of them were on the run, eager to get out of danger, when Black Dan Dutton went down.

The fall of the bully, and his groans of pain, told them that the fight had ended, so the hasty retreat came to an end.

"I reckon he has got his ticket for soup!" one of the crowd exclaimed.

"He is only disabled for the present," Dick

Talbot replied. "I did not care to kill the man, although the cowardly scoundrel richly deserves to die in my opinion, for I haven't any doubt that he planned to have me assassinated; still, I don't care to have his death at my door, and so I only put a ball through his shoulder; the wound will be apt to be an ugly one, but it will not kill him."

By this time Dr. Brown, who was one of the spectators—the Doc was never known to miss a show of this sort—was at work, attending to the fallen man.

"I reckon I am fixed for planting," the big fellow moaned.

"Nonsense!" Doc Brown exclaimed, "this is only a flea-bite! You are all right and will live to spoil many a gallon of whisky yet."

"Wa-al, I hopeso," the wounded man observed in the most disconsolate way. And then he happened to catch sight of Talbot.

"It is all right; it is your game this time," he added.

"So it appears," the Ranch King remarked, dryly. "But if you are not contented—if you desire satisfaction at my hands, I will be ready to accommodate you when you get in fighting trim again."

"Oh, no!" the wounded man exclaimed. "I have got all I want. I reckon you don't ketch me bucking up ag'in' you no more, not if I know myself, and I reckon I do. If you are satisfied, I am, and I hope you won't bear any malice, 'cos you kin bet all you are worth that I don't want to have anything more to do with you."

"When a man is down and acknowledges that he is beaten I am always content to let the matter rest," the Ranch King replied. "So long as you are satisfied to mind your own business and let me alone, you will be safe from harm as far as I am concerned."

"Oh, I am through! I ain't a boy! I know when I have got enuff!" Black Dan Dutton declared.

By this time the doctor had made a careful examination of the wound and announced that though Dutton would be apt to be laid up for awhile, yet no serious results would follow.

"That was my idea," the Ranch King observed. "If I had wanted to close his account with this world, I should not have shot him in the shoulder, but put my bullet where it would have touched a vital point."

And none of the listeners believed this was an empty boast, for by this time they had come to the conclusion that Dick Talbot was one of those marvelous shots who was able to send his bullet true to the mark every time.

"And now I think I will see what this party up on the hillside has to say for himself," the Ranch King remarked.

Then he mounted his horse and, with the cowboys, rode off down the gulch, a number of the most agile-footed citizens hastening after the party, anxious to be present when Dick Talbot interviewed the red chief.

After the Ranch King's departure the doctor got the citizens to construct a rude sort of a litter, and on it Black Dan Dutton was borne back to Silveropolis.

When Dick Talbot and his cowboys got well into the old Indian trail they were obliged to dismount, for the path became too rough for the horses.

Tethering their steeds they went ahead on foot, the citizens bringing up the rear.

Upon arriving at the clump of pines they found that Mud Turtle had dragged his prisoner into the trail, and had him in a sitting posture with his back against a rock.

The Ranch King surveyed the man for a few moments in silence.

And now that a good look could be had at the face of the supposed red skin it was plain to all that he was no Indian, for his chin was covered with a scrubby beard, and the paint, by means of which he had disguised himself so that from the gulch below he had looked like a red chief, was now plainly visible.

Despite his disguise he was recognized by both the Ranch King and the citizens, now that they were near him.

"Aha! it is the half-breed cowboy who tried so hard to swear my life away!" Dick Talbot exclaimed, after he had taken a good look at the man.

The half-breed was taking matters very coolly and did not seem to be particularly impressed with the gravity of his position.

"I am glad you have come!" he exclaimed, "for you will release me from the hands of this fellow, who has tied me up like a fowl ready for the pot."

The citizens looked at each other. Here was impudence with a vengeance.

"Well, my man, you don't lack for assurance, that is certain!" Talbot remarked.

"Is it assurance then to be asked to be released when a man has been assaulted without cause?" the half-breed demanded, indignantly.

"Assaulted without cause, you miserable assassin!" Dick Talbot exclaimed, sternly.

"Why do you call me an assassin? It is a lie! I am no assassin!" the half-breed cried.

"You scoundrel! were you not lying in wait to assassinate me?" the Ranch King demanded.

"No; I deny it!" the other replied, promptly.

"What were you doing here then, and in such a disguise as this?"

"That is my business," the half-breed answered, arrogantly. "By adoption I am a chief of the Apache tribe, and I have a right to wear the Indian dress if I choose."

"And the right to deck your face with the paint that an Indian chief never assumes unless he is going upon the war-path?"

"Do you not know that the Apaches are now at war with the Comanches, and that as a chief of the tribe I am bound to help my red brothers all I can?"

"Bah! that reasoning is absurd! If you know anything about the Indians at all you ought to be aware that up in these mountains would be about the last place in the world to look for the Comanches."

"True! I know that. I did not say that I was looking for Comanches here. I was on my way to join the Apaches so as to be with them when they made their raid to the southward."

"And what were you doing skulking here amid the pines?"

"I saw the people down in the gulch and had a curiosity to know why they were there, and so I waited to see. I concealed myself in the pines, because I knew that if I was seen in this rig it would alarm the people."

"Oh, yes; all this is extremely reasonable!" Dick Talbot exclaimed, contemptuously. "But if you succeed in getting any one to believe it I reckon it will be a wonder! I haven't exactly got at your game yet, but I think I will in time. For some reason you have a grudge against me; that was proved by the lying testimony you gave on my trial."

"I did not swear you were the man who killed Mexican Mike!" the half-breed exclaimed. "You ought to do me justice! All I said was that you resembled the man. If I had wished to injure you, as you claim, how easy it would have been for me to swear that you were the party whom I saw strike the blow."

"Oh, yes; you worked the trick in an extremely cunning manner!" the Ranch King exclaimed, with a contemptuous smile. "You did not swear right out that I was the man, but you gave your evidence in such a way that it fixed the crime upon me without doubt."

"I only swore to what I saw!" the half-breed retorted. "Why should I harbor any grudge against you? Are you not a stranger to me?"

"That is true enough, and I admit that the matter puzzles me, but I understand well enough that you did your best to have me convicted of murder; as to why you took the course you did, that is what I have got to find out, and I will do it too before I get through with you!"

"Oh, I am not afraid to have my actions looked into, for I am an honest man!" the half-breed declared.

"We will see about that! It is my impression that you are as big a rascal as ever struck this section of country," the Ranch King observed. "As to your cock-and-bull story about being on your way to join the Apaches to aid them in a raid against the Comanches, that is altogether too thin. You were here to assassinate me! It was arranged that you were to shoot me as I came up the gulch, and in order to afford you an opportunity to commit this crime was why Dutton challenged me to this duel, but whether you put him up to this scheme or he hatched it himself, is a question, and one that I will have settled, too!"

"The idea is absurd!" the half-breed exclaimed.

"We will see about that before we get through with this matter. It is my belief that you are the party who engineered the scheme, for I do not believe Black Dan Dutton has brains enough to plan anything of this kind. He went into it, though, when it was suggested to him, quickly enough, I have no doubt, for he had cause to desire my death, as I had shown him up as a coward before the whole town."

"If Dutton says that I entered into any plot with him, he is a liar!" the half-breed asserted, in the most arrogant manner. "It is true that I met him yesterday in the Hotel de Sonora, and when he spoke about his trouble with you, I told him that the only chance he had to redeem himself was by challenging you to a fair fight, and until he did so, he could never expect to hold up his head in the town."

"He agreed with me and said he would dare you to meet him on the first opportunity. That was all that passed between us, and if he says otherwise he is a liar."

This was a cunning move on the part of the half-breed.

He had recognized Mud Turtle as being the supposed peon whom Big Pete had assaulted, and understood that, as the landlord of the Hotel de Sonora had surmised, the peon had come to the saloon to play the spy; so he knew that testimony was at hand to show that he and Black Dan Dutton had been in conference, but by the adroit admission he hoped to explain the matter.

Both he and Black Dan had been so guarded in their conversation that he felt sure the spy had not been able to overhear what was said.

Mud Turtle's disguise had been so complete that the prisoner had no suspicion at the time of the saloon affair that he was anything but what he appeared to be, but after his capture was effected, and he had time to examine the man who had so thoroughly surprised him, he saw that, although an Indian, he was no peon, and immediately he jumped to the conclusion that the chief was Dick Talbot's pard, the famous Mud Turtle.

After his capture, the half-breed had assumed an indignant air and endeavored to get into conversation with the Indian, but Mud Turtle did not take any notice of his words, and so the crafty scoundrel was obliged to practice patience until the Ranch King arrived.

"Well, Mud Turtle, what have you got to say about this matter?"

In his terse, graphic way the Indian described his adventures.

He told how he had disguised himself as a peon and gone to the Hotel de Sonora, pretending to be a herdsman on a spree; how he had completed his drunk there, apparently, and gone to sleep on a bench. Related how Black Dan Dutton and the half-breed had held a long conversation, but had been careful to speak in a low tone that he could not overhear their words, and winding up by telling how he had been assaulted by Big Pete, and put in to the cellar, from which he had managed to escape.

"Oho! Big Pete will find he has got himself into a hornets' nest, I think!" the Ranch King exclaimed when the Indian had finished his tale.

The disguised brigand had listened intently, and inwardly he chuckled with satisfaction as he reflected that nothing had come out against him.

"I hope, my friends, that you will take into consideration the fact that I am not responsible for Big Pete's actions!" he exclaimed. "You cannot say that I injured you in any way!" he continued, addressing Mud Turtle.

"No," the chief responded. "Big Pete—me hit—Mud Turtle fix him!" and the Indian laid his hand upon the hilt of his knife, in an extremely significant way.

Then the chief continued his recital, telling how, after hearing that Talbot and Black Dan Dutton were to meet in the gulch, and fight a duel in the morning, the idea came to him that some foul play was intended, so he placed himself to watch on the road that led to the gulch, and when the half-breed came stealing along in the cold, gray light of the dawn, he followed him; watched him assume his Indian disguise and take a position amid the pines.

He testified positively that the half-breed had drawn a bead on the Ranch King with his rifle, and was just about discharging the piece when he pounced upon him.

"It is a mistake!" the disguised brigand declared. "I was but resting my rifle on a rock and had no thoughts of discharging it, although, possibly, it might have looked as though I did."

"Gentlemen, I am going to give this man the benefit of the doubt, and so refrain from taking vengeance into my own hands. I am willing the men of Silveropolis shall decide whether he is guilty or not."

"I am satisfied, and, if I am allowed time, I can prove my innocence!" the other declared.

And so back to the town he was conveyed, and locked up in the calaboose, where Mayor Plunkett came in haste to interview him.

CHAPTER XXVI. IN THE JAIL.

"PRETTY bad box you are in!" the mayor exclaimed.

The disguised brigand protested that he was an innocent man, and that it was all a mistake.

"If I am given time, I can prove by the Apaches that they sent a message for me to join them and take the war-path against the Comanches!" he declared.

"That would account for your rig and your presence on the hillside," the mayor remarked. "But the Indian declares, positively, that you were about to fire on the Ranch King when he interfered."

"He is mistaken, although I admit that such a mistake was only natural under the circumstances. I had rested my rifle on the rock, over which I leaned, anxious to see the fight in the gulch below."

"How much time will you require to produce this evidence of which you speak?"

"Not over two days; by sending a messenger to-day, I can surely have my witnesses here the day after to-morrow."

"Very well, that will do. I will set your trial for the day after to-morrow."

"Yes, that will satisfy me. I suppose there will be no objection to having my friends visit me so that I will be able to prepare for the ordeal?"

"Oh, no, I guess not; under proper precautions, of course, so that they cannot aid you to escape."

"I do not want to escape!" and the half-breed drew himself up, proudly. "I am an innocent man, and I am anxious to prove that I am to the satisfaction of everybody; you need

not fear that I shall endeavor to avoid my trial."

"Well, I hope you will come out all right, of course," the mayor remarked, in his amiable way, and then he departed.

In the outer room he encountered the marshal.

Livingstone carried his arm in a sling, but otherwise was all right.

When the prisoner's request was made known to him, he shook his head.

"Don't you like the idea?" the mayor asked. "If he is not allowed to communicate with his friends, the man will have a hard time to clear himself."

"Yes, that is true enough," the marshal remarked, in a reflective way. "But you kin bet yer life that I will take durned good care that none of 'em puts up any job to sneak this feller out of the calaboose."

"Do you think any such game will be tried? The man declares that he is innocent, and says he can prove it to the satisfaction of everybody."

"Oh, it is his play to say that, of course, but, Mister Mayor, when you have had as much experience with these half-breeds as I have, I reckon you will come to the conclusion that the heft of them are durned slippery customers!"

"I agree with you there; very few of them can be trusted."

"And in regard to this galoot it seems to me that he is in the tightest kind of a fix," the marshal remarked. "And do you know, Mister Mayor, since this hyer thing happened I have been doing a heap of thinking over this Dick Talbot matter, and I have 'bout come to the conclusion that the Ranch King had no more to do with the killing of the Maverick Man than either you or I."

"Then he is an innocent man, indeed, for it is certain that we had no hand in the murder of Mexican Mike," the mayor observed.

"I reckon that it is just as the Ranch King declares; a put-up job to fix him, but it has slipped up, and this half-breed cuss is in a hole."

"I think myself that he is in a pretty bad way."

"And we must be keerful that he don't slip through our fingers."

"Oh, I don't think there is much danger of anything of that kind happening," the mayor replied, who was noted for always looking at the cheerful side of things.

"Wa-al, I reckon thar ain't," the marshal remarked, after thinking over the matter for a moment. "Jack Mason is no slouch, and the man who gits ahead of Jack must rise airy in the morning."

Jack Mason was the jailer, a big, burly fellow, noted as being one of the fighting men in the town.

The mayor and marshal departed, after first cautioning Mason to keep a good lookout for his prisoner.

The jailer responded confidently that they need not trouble themselves about the man.

The calaboose was a strongly-built, one-story shanty; within were two rooms; the inner one was the cell where the prisoners were confined, the outer apartment was occupied by the jailer.

There was a strongly-barred window, without glass, in the partition which separated the rooms, so that the jailer, while seated in his apartment, could command a view of the other.

Under such circumstances it would seem to be an impossibility for a prisoner to escape, for the jailer could watch every movement he made.

The only possible chance of escaping was during the dark hours of the night, when sleep might seal the warden's eyes.

The marshal had thought about this and spoken to the jailer; the man replied that as it was his custom to sleep nearly all day, he could be trusted to keep awake at night.

Jail cells are never noted for their furniture, and in the wild mining-camps of the West the cells of the calaboose, as the jail is usually termed, seldom boast of anything more than a buffalo-robe, which serves the prisoner both for bed and covering at night, and an old box in place of a stool.

This was all the furniture that the half-breed's cell possessed, and after the mayor and marshal departed, the disguised brigand reflected over the situation for a few moments.

Although he had talked so fluently about how easy it would be for him to show that he had no intention of firing at the Ranch King, yet he knew well enough that he could not do anything of the kind, and his only chance of getting out of the trap into which he had fallen lay in effecting an escape, for if he remained to be tried it was about as certain as anything could be that he would be convicted, and when a man is convicted of an attempt at murder in a wild Western camp, and sentenced to be hung, little time is usually wasted between the pronouncing of the doom and the execution thereof.

The brigand was game, possessed wonderful nerve, and that was why he bore himself so well, even when conscious that he had become

entangled in a snare from which it was doubtful if he would escape with life.

For fully ten minutes he meditated over the situation, and then he approached the grated window and addressed the jailer, who was taking his ease with his chair tilted back against the wall, smoking a pipe.

"The mayor told me that I could see my friends if I wished," the prisoner said.

"I reckon you kin; I hain't got any objections."

"Will you send a message for me?"

"Oh, I ain't got no time."

"You can get a messenger."

"Messengers cost money."

"Of course, and you will expect something for your trouble too. I do not want you to do it for nothing."

"Ob, didn't ye? Wa-al, now ye'r talking! That is a hoss of another color!" exclaimed the jailer, suddenly becoming interested. "If you have got any ducats to spend, and ar' willing to throw 'em out like a gen'leman, I reckon I stand ready to do anything I kin for you, in reason, of course."

"Certainly, I understand that. Here's a ten," and the brigand passed the gold-piece through the bars. "Will that be enough?"

Jack Mason jumped up with prompt alacrity and took the money.

"Oh, yes, that will do. Who is it you want to see?"

"Big Pete."

"All right! I will send for him right away."

The jailer was as good as his word, and within fifteen minutes the host of the Hotel de Sonora entered the jail.

The jailer admitted him to the prisoner's cell, only taking the precaution to lock him in after he entered, and to call a couple of friends to keep him company in the outer room.

It was not his game to allow the prisoner to make an attempt to escape by a sudden rush.

After Big Pete entered, the brigand sat down on the buffalo-robe, which he had drawn in to one of the further corners of the cell, and the visitor took a seat on the box by his side.

By assuming this position, and conversing in whispers, it was possible to hold a conversation without fear of the others in the outer apartment overhearing their words.

"This is a bad business!" Big Pete declared, with an ominous shake of the head.

"Bad is no word for it!" the brigand responded. "I suppose you have heard all the particulars?"

"Oh, yes, ill news is fast of foot, and there are always plenty of good-natured friends to bring you word when any misfortune of this kind occurs," Big Pete replied, with a grimace.

"You know, then, that the peon whom you rapped on the head in such a dextrous manner was this red cowboy of the Ranch King's, called Mud Turtle?"

"Yes; and if all accounts that I hear of the fellow are true, I have not heard the last of the affair," the saloon-keeper remarked, a dark scowl on his face.

"I think it is extremely probable that he will attempt to call you to an account for the affair, for he bears the reputation of being a fighter."

"I am prepared for him," and Big Pete put his hand on the butt of one of the two revolvers belted to his waist.

"What did you say when the tale was told to you?"

"Oh, I knew it was no use to deny it, so I said it was true that I hit the man on the head with a bottle, but I explained the matter by saying that he was crazy drunk and was about to draw a weapon on me when I did so."

"That is a good story, but I suppose you will have to fight the Indian all the same, though," the brigand remarked.

"Yes, and I have made up my mind to take the bull by the horns; that, to my thinking, is always the best way in a case of this kind, so the first time I encounter the Indian I shall go for him."

"I don't suppose you will be anxious to throw yourself in his way, though?" the brigand remarked, with a laugh that displayed his white teeth.

"Ob, no, not I! A prudent man does not rush into affairs of this kind," the other replied.

"It is my game to make this red-skin seek me, and if he ever dares to enter the Hotel de Sonora he will be a lucky man if he gets out alive."

"I see; and now in regard to my case."

Big Pete shook his head.

"You think it is a desperate one?"

"Yes; you know how fickle public sentiment is—it veers about like a weathercock."

"Very true!"

"Only a short time ago all the town was anxious to hang the Ranch King, because the citizens were sure he killed Mexican Mike; now they have gone to the other extreme and are all confident that he was unjustly accused."

"Yes, but what has this to do with me?"

"Why, as the Ranch King did not kill the man, some one else must, and a big lot of the citizens are saying right out that they reckon you must have had a hand in it."

"Ah, but there is no proof of that!" the brigand exclaimed.

"That is true, and none of them say that there is, but they are certain, though, that you meant to murder the Ranch King."

"The chances are good, then, that I will swing?"

"I wouldn't give a golden ounce for your life!" Big Pete declared.

"I am in a bad way then."

"No mistake about it."

"Some scheme must be devised to enable me to escape. I have secured a delay for two days, so there is time to arrange some plan."

Big Pete reflected for a few moments, and then he shook his head slowly.

"Upon my word I cannot think of anything, but then I was never good at planning."

This was the truth, for Big Pete had always been noted for being a rather dull-headed fellow.

"Is there any lads in town whom you can trust?"

"Hardly a soul in a matter of this kind."

"Could not the jailer be bribed?"

"Oh, no! It would not do to try any game of that kind on him."

"There are a few of my men at an old ranch in the mountains. It is on the north road and about five miles from the town. It is called the Gallego Ranch. Send a messenger up there—a man who can be trusted, mind, not to blab about the message to all the town. Write you a line to John Gallego, merely say that his cowboy, Jo Cardoza, has got into trouble—is in jail and he had better come and see about the matter. Then if by any unlucky accident the letter should become public it will not compromise any one."

"Yes, yes, I see. Is that all?"

"All, unless you can think of some plan to aid me to escape."

"Well, if I do, I will let you know, but I am not good at scheming," and Big Pete rose to depart.

"Look out for the Indian!" the brigand continued. "Kill him if you can, for he is dangerous."

"You may depend upon it that I will do my best," the other declared. "I intend to secure an advantage in the first place by making him fight me on my own grounds. No man yet has sought me in the Hotel de Sonora and lived to boast that he had the best of the fight!"

And with this declaration Big Pete took his departure.

CHAPTER XXVII. FRIENDS IN NEED.

"THE dull-headed brute!" the brigand exclaimed in disgust, as he resumed his seat on the box and gave himself up to reflection after Big Pete's departure.

"I am booked for the rope if I depended upon him to do anything to affect my rescue. I must send for the strangers who helped me to escape from Guaymas. They are men with brains in their head and will be apt to devise some way to get me out of this hole. But I must arrange some excuse for calling upon them to visit me so that after I escape no suspicion will be attached to them."

For a good half-hour the prisoner reflected the matter before a scheme suggested itself.

During this time the jailer's companions had departed and he had returned to his pipe.

The prisoner went to the barred window.

"Jailer, do you want to make some money?" he asked.

"You jest bet I do—if it kin be done honestly!" Mason exclaimed, immediately jumping to the conclusion that the half-breed was trying to bribe him.

"I am jest as hungry arter money as any man you kin scare up in this hyer town, but, understand, pard, I am not for sale, so if that is yer idee, give it up, 'cos you can't raise ducats enuff for to buy me."

"Oh, no; I know better than to try any such game with a man like yourself. The scheme I am going to propose is an honest one, but it requires a little money to carry it out."

"Wa-al, then, I reckon I will not go into it, 'cos I ain't so situated as to be able to scare up many ducats."

"I have discovered a valuable lead up in the mountains—one of the old mines that was worked by the Spaniards years ago, and then abandoned after the Mexican revolution on account of the Indian troubles. Now, I need money, and I would be willing to sell the secret of this mine if I could get anybody to give me a fair price for it."

"Oh, yes, I see; why, man alive! you ought to strike some tenderfoot who has come to this region on purpose to invest in some sich speculation; you would git twice the money out of some sich galoot than you would from any of us cusses in the town, 'cos we don't take so much stock in sich things as we might," and the jailer winked knowingly.

"Ah, there is nothing wrong about this mine!" the prisoner declared. "Any one who is a judge of such things can see that at a glance when an inspection is made; and I will be willing to give back the money if the party

who buys the secret of the mine is not satisfied after he looks at it that he has got a bargain."

"Wa-al, now, I reckon that is a pretty fair offer!" the jailer exclaimed.

"Yes; could you not get some of your friends to go in with you?"

"Oh, no, they are all 'bout as badly off as I am; you want to strize a tenderfoot who has come out hyer jist on purpose to put his ducats into something of the kind, and who is well-heeled for sich business."

"Oh, I could do better, of course, with a stranger, but there isn't any in town."

"Yes, thar is—two on 'em, over to the Silver Ship!" the jailer exclaimed, as the thought occurred to him. "I heered Skipper Bill say last night that the cusses had come out hyer on purpose to put their rocks into some good speculation."

Of course the reader has doubtless guessed that this was the point which the prisoner hoped to reach when he began the conversation, but it was his game to have the suggestion in regard to the strangers come from the jailer.

Then the brigand inquired concerning the men, and made an arrangement with his keeper to have them summoned, promising to pay him well for his trouble if the strangers concluded to invest in the secret of the abandoned mine.

"I'll have them over hyer in a brace of shakes!" Jack Mason declared. "That is, if they ar' whar I kin git at them."

A messenger was dispatched to the Silver Ship and in a short time he returned with the two strangers, the speculators, Jonathan Morton and William Bledstone.

The pair had heard the story of the half-breed's arrest and were waiting at the hotel, anticipating a summons, for they had confidence that the brigand would find some excuse for wanting to sell them, so that no one would suspect that they had ever met before.

After they entered the jail, Jack Mason explained why he had sent for them.

The pair appeared to be immediately impressed with the idea that there was money in the affair, and said as much, but threw out a hint that though they might be taken for tenderfeet, yet they had cut their eye-teeth in mining matters and were not disposed to be fooled by any "ghost" story.

Then the jailer said he thought the half-breed was honest about the matter, and told of his statement that he was willing to give back the money if the purchaser was not satisfied after an examination.

"Well, that is fair enough!" Bledstone declared.

"Yes, that proposal is perfectly square," Morton remarked. "There is no doubt that quite a number of rich mines were worked up in this district in the old days by the Spaniards, and when they were driven out of the country by the Mexican revolution, the mines were abandoned, for the Mexicans did not fight the Indians with the dogged courage that the Spaniards displayed. Some of the mines have been re-discovered, and have proved to be very valuable."

"I reckoned it was worth looking into," the jailer remarked. "I would have taken a hack at it myself, but I play too much poker to ever keep any money."

"Morton, you had best conduct the negotiations," Bledstone remarked. "You are better at such bargains than I, and more experienced in mining matters too."

"All right; I am agreeable."

Then Morton was admitted into the prisoner's cell, while Bledstone took a chair in the outer apartment and chatted with the jailer.

"Glad to see you, sir, and I hope we may be able to do some business together," the prisoner remarked in a tone loud enough for the jailer to hear, as he conducted his visitor to the box in the corner and resumed his seat upon the buffalo-robe.

"Well, you are in a nice fix this time," Morton remarked in a low tone.

"Yes, about as badly off as I was in Guaymas, when I first had the pleasure of seeing you," the brigand admitted.

"You were threatened with death then at the hands of the Mexican soldiers, and now the miner's rope dangles before you."

"Very true; and it is safe to say that the second is fully as dangerous as the first."

"I believe you are right. There is a strong feeling against you; nine out of every ten men in the town believe that you were laying in wait expressly to kill this Dick Talbot, and if it had not been for the Indian you surely would have shot him."

"I will admit to you that that opinion is strictly correct," the Mexican said with a light laugh. "And it is as certain as anything can be in this uncertain world that I would have slain the Ranch King if Heaven had not worked a miracle in his behalf, and these are not the days of miracles, you know."

"The coming of the Indian was something in that line," Morton suggested.

"On, no, that was man's doing," the brigand replied. "This Ranch King is no man's fool! When he was accused of the murder of Mexican Mike, the Maverick Man, and a chain of evi-

dence woven, which would have hung him like a dog had he not been cunning enough to escape, he naturally came to the conclusion that it was not accident, but design, which had so nearly cost him his life. A fog was striking at him in the dark, and when he succeeded in breaking through the snare in which he had been entangled, he immediately set to work to discover who it was that had tried to trap him.

"His first move was to set the red-skin at work, and the dusky scoundrel played his part so well that he deceived good judges of men like Big Pete and myself, and though we suspected that the fellow was playing the spy, yet we had no suspicion that he was not a peon."

"We attempted to settle him and failed, and so he was able to track me and spoil as good a scheme as ever the wit of man devised."

"I see you are right; it was the art of man, and not a miracle, which saved Dick Talbot from your bullet."

"Exactly! and pardon me if I call your attention to the fact that I fell into this trap while trying to carry out the arrangement I made with you."

"Oh, I understand that, and you may rest assured that both my friend and myself consider that it is our duty, even at the risk of life, to get you out of this scrape!" Morton declared, earnestly.

"You will observe that I have kept faith with you," the brigand remarked, "although there is no doubt I could have purchased my freedom by revealing to the Ranch King who it was that set me on. But I scorn to do a thing of that kind. Although I am a brigand and everything that is bad—if you believe what men say of me—yet you will find I am a slave to my word."

"I have never doubted you," Morton replied. "And if I had not been sure that you were a superior man, you may be certain I would never have taken the trouble to rescue you from the jail in Guaymas."

"That was a cunning trick!" the brigand exclaimed. "And the Mexican authorities were furious at my escape. I was in a tight place then, but, oh, my friend! I fear I am in a tighter one here!"

"This jail is not as strong as the one in Guaymas," the other remarked, with a glance around.

"True, yet the conditions are not as favorable for an escape. You will perceive there is no window here on the outside; only that one looking into the jailer's room, and by means of which a watch can be kept upon me at all times."

"How about the dead hours of the night?"

The brigand shook his head.

"The watch will be kept up day and night," he replied. "There are two jailers; one keeps guard during the day and the other at night, so there will not be a single moment when a pair of eyes will not be upon me."

Morton reflected for a moment.

"This will be a more difficult job than I expected," he remarked.

"Yes, worse than the affair at Guaymas."

"How about the jailers?"

"With the day man nothing can be done, even if he could be bribed, for I could not hope to escape during the daytime, and the one who is on duty at night—Jack Mason is his name—cannot be approached."

"We will have to get at him some other way, then," Morton observed, reflectively. "He is, probably, a hard drinker."

"Oh, yes; few men of his class who are not, but if you are thinking of getting him drunk the chances are a thousand to one against it. Such men as he are well-seasoned, and you could not get him to drink liquor enough to have any effect upon him."

"Suppose the liquor was doctored—drugged, you understand?"

"Ah, yes," and a ray of hope lighted up the dark face of the brigand.

"But the difficulty would be to get him to drink it," the prisoner answered, after a pause. "Unless the liquor was given him in such a way as to disarm his suspicions, he would not be apt to take it. And then, can the drug be introduced so that it will not be apparent to the smell or taste?"

"Oh, yes; morphine will do the job, and that is something that I understand all about, for I am a morphine fiend."

The speaker saw by the expression upon the face of the prisoner that he did not understand, so he explained.

"Morphine is a peculiar drug; it is a child of opium, and has the properties of not only dulling pain, but of transporting a mortal to the seventh heaven of delight, when taken in a certain way."

"Ah, yes, I understand; I have heard of opium-eaters."

"I am one of the bond-slaves, and when I come to a wild country like this I always provide an ample supply, knowing that I will not be able to procure it at all times. Now, it will be an easy matter for me to introduce enough into a flask of whisky, so that if a man takes a good drink it will be certain to put him to sleep, and when he is once fast in the arms of Morpheus he is not likely to wake for hours."

"Yes, yes, the scheme is a good one, if you can succeed in getting him to drink."

"I think I can arrange the matter by a little clever sleight-of-hand. I will have two flasks, exactly alike, so they cannot be told apart; one all right, the other doctored; and I will arrange it so that we will all drink from the O. K. flask, then I will substitute the other for it and give it to you; the jailer, having his appetite whetted by one drink, can probably be induced to take another, and if he does he will be sound asleep inside of half an hour; then comes your chance; but how will you get out of this? I haven't got another set of burglar's tools to give you."

"I have the ones you gave me in Guaymas all right," the brigand replied. "They are sewed up in my undershirt. I had a thought that they might prove useful some time."

"The idea was a good one. With the saws you can easily cut your way through these wooden bars, so as to get into the next room; then you can take the keys from the jailer and let yourself out. In the rear of the first house to the right I will have a horse tied, so a means of escape will be provided for you. It is a pity that I cannot smuggle a disguise in to you," the speculator added, surveying the brigand's Indian dress.

"Oh, that is all right. I have my own clothes on underneath. All I have to do is to strip off the hunting-shirt and leggins, and I will take the jailer's hat."

"And now then, let us consider how the situation will be after your escape," Morton remarked. "The chances are good that the jailer will not suspect that he has been drugged, and so he will be apt to keep quiet about the whisky. He will declare that he only dozed for a moment. Our visit will be inquired into, and we will be able to give a clear account."

"I can arrange that matter all right!" the brigand declared. "I do know the secret of an abandoned mine in the mountains, but the lode is a worthless one, although upon a casual inspection it appears to be rich; so, when you say that you came to see me to buy the secret of the mine, you will be able to show that there is such a thing. Have you a pencil and memorandum-book?"

Morton produced them, and then the brigand gave a description how to reach the old mine.

"Now," he said, when it was all written down, "you tell the jailer that you are going to see the mine before closing any bargain, and that you will come to-night again, as soon as you return, to settle the matter, so he will be prepared for your visit. Time it so as to get here about eleven, because the coast will not be clear for my escape until after midnight."

Morton agreed with the brigand in regard to this, and then put the question:

"Have you got about enough of this affair?—are you satisfied that the Ranch King is too strong for you to contend with?"

The face of Fernando Bernal grew fairly black with passion.

"Eternal curses light upon him!" he cried, in low, suppressed tones. "Do you suppose that a man like I am will ever rest content until the grave closes over my enemy or myself?"

"When you are at liberty you will renew the fight, then?"

"Yes, a thousand times yes! The turn of fortune's wheel will not always favor this American; my time will come if I have but the patience to wait. Say a man fails nine times, that is no reason why he should not succeed on the tenth trial."

"True, and if in any of your schemes we can aid you, either with our service, or money, do not fail to call upon us."

Then Morton rose, Jack Mason unlocked the door so he could come out, and he explained to the jailer the arrangement which had been made.

Mr. Mason remarked that he thought it was wise not to buy a pig in a poke, and he "reckoned" he would not put any money in a mine unless he could have a good look at it, and when Morton mentioned that he would like to visit the prisoner upon his return, although it would probably be ten or thereabouts before he could get back, the jailer said he would have no objection, provided he came alone, but it wouldn't do to let in a "gang" at such an hour.

"If I make a good trade, I will see that you come in for something," Morton promised.

The jailer grinned and the pair departed.

"I reckon you have caught him for a sucker, and no mistake!" Jack Mason remarked to the prisoner.

In a little while the half-breed asked for washing materials so he could remove the war-paint. These were furnished, and soon he looked something like himself again.

That night at ten minutes past eleven, Gordon applied for admission.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A CUNNING TRICK.

JACK MASON ascertained that Morton was alone and then he opened the door and admitted him.

The jailer had company; a big, overgrown

fellow, whom he introduced as Mister Mickey Doyle, was seated in the apartment, and the two had been having a "leetle friendly game of poker," as Jack Mason explained to pass the time away.

"How is my friend behind the bars?" Morton asked.

"I reckon he's asleep," the jailer replied. "I noticed awhile ago that he had camped down on his buffalo-robe, and as he hain't let a sound out of him since, I reckon he is in the land of Nod. Did you git onto his mine?"

"Oh, yes, I found it without difficulty."

"And how is she, hey?" inquired the jailer with eager curiosity.

"I think it is a big thing!"

"You do, hey?"

"Yes, I made a careful examination, and as far as all the indications went the lead is a good one."

"Wa-al, then he wasn't giving you no ghost-story arter all!"

"Oh, no, but it is a property I should judge which will require considerable money to develop, and that is the reason, I suppose, why he was willing to let other parties into it. A man of his kind would never be able to raise the money to make anything out of it."

"Yes, that is so, and from the way he is situated now I reckon it won't be long 'fore he won't take no interest in any mines in this hyer world," and then the jailer in pantomime indicated the hanging process.

"I did not have much talk with him upon that subject, of course, for it is a rather delicate matter. He declared though that he was innocent, and that when his witness came he wouldn't have any difficulty in proving it."

"The galoot is game!" the jailer declared with an approving nod. "You would be safe in betting big money onto it. He holds his end up as well as any man I ever see'd."

"That is true; the fellow does not appear to be at all worried by his position; he has perfect faith that he is going to come out all right."

"Stranger, I wouldn't go ten dollars on his chance for life!" the jailer declared, lowering his voice to a loud whisper.

"Is that so?"

"Sure as you are born!"

"You astonish me!"

"I have been talking with the boys, and they have got it in for him," the jailer explained. "He is a stranger in the town, and the boys have kinder got a notion that he has been hanging 'round the camp for no good."

"He is a cowboy, I understood, and is here on a sort of a vacation, being out of a job and in search of another."

"The boyees have been putting two and two together, kinder comparing notes, you know, and none on 'em has ever seen this fellow try to git any bit of work, and they have kinder got the idee into their heads that he is one of the cusses who goes to look for work and is dreadfully afraid that he will find some."

"Yes, yes, I see. You think, then, that he doesn't stand any chance to get out of this scrape?"

"Nary time! he is broked for a rope, sure! Thar is a good deal of talk 'bout Judge Lynch and the Vigilantes putting in an appearance; some of the boyees are reckoning that it is about time that this hyer camp war purified. Big Pete and his gang have been running things 'bout long enuff, an' thar is pretty big talk 'bout cleaning out the Hotel de Sonora, for it ain't anything but a cut-throat dive, nobow you kin fix it!"

"I am glad you spoke about this matter, for it gives me a cue how to conduct the mine business," Morton remarked. "The half-breed is anxious to retain an interest in the mine. He offers to sell three-fourths for a low price, we to find the money to develop the property."

"Nail him on that, stranger!" exclaimed the jailer, in a hoarse whisper. "'Cos I am betting a hundred to one that he will be dancing upon nothing afore he is three days older, and then you will have the hull mine to yourself."

"It was my idea to let him retain a quarter interest, and I drew out an agreement to that effect," Morton explained. "I am going to pay him ten dollars to bind the bargain, have him sign the agreement to-night, and pay him the rest to-morrow."

"Fix the time of payment three days off and I reckon you won't have to pay him nothing!" Jack Mason whispered, hoarsely, with a chuckle.

"Yes, but as you will probably come in for what he leaves, that would be money out of your pocket," Morton suggested.

"That's so, by hokey! I never thought of that!"

"Oh, I will make the payment so as to have things all square. By the way, he wanted me to bring him a flask of whisky; is there any objection?"

"None that I knows on, so long as we git a drink outen it, hey, Mickey?" the jailer replied, with a hoarse laugh.

"Oh, be Job! me throat is as dry as a dust heap!" the Irishman exclaimed.

"Mickey has got the biggest swaller of any man in the town!" the jailer declared.

And the two laughed so heartily at the joke that the noise attracted the attention of the prisoner.

He rose and came to the barred window.

"Aha! you have returned, I see!" he exclaimed, perceiving Morton. "Well, how goes it? Are you satisfied?"

"Yes; I will take the mine on the terms we arranged. Here is a contract and ten dollars to bind the bargain."

And as he spoke Morton produced a written document and the money.

"I reckon you won't find no pen or ink in this hyer shebang," Jack Mason declared.

"I have a fountain-pen here which carries its own ink, so that is all right," Morton replied.

The pen and contract were passed through the bars, and the half-breed affixed his signature to it, pocketed the gold-piece, and then returned the contract and pen to Morton.

"Say! you were talking 'bout some whisky," the jailer exclaimed. "Now, I reckon it would be a first-class idee for us to take a drink all round to kinder wet this hyer bargain, jist for luck, you know."

"That's so; here's the fluid."

And Morton drew a pint flask from the lower right hand pocket of the overcoat which he wore; the nights were inclined to be a little chilly, so the wearing of such a garment excited no comment.

"I've only got a tin cup hyer, but I reckon thar will do," Jack Mason remarked, producing the article.

"Will you go it first?" Morton asked, tendering the flask to the jailer.

"Oh, no; arter you is manners," responded the other. "Say, you ain't got a big supply, have you? One pint flask 'tween four on us, thank the Lord thar ain't no more on us!"

And then the jailer laughed vociferously at his own joke.

Morton had an idea that it was possible the jailer suspected there might be something the matter with the whisky, so he poured the fluid out into the cup and drank it in such a way that both of the men could plainly see he had swallowed the liquor and there was no deception about it.

"I suppose our friend here is entitled to the next drink," Morton remarked, nodding to the prisoner.

"Yes; I reckon that is 'bout the squar' thing," the jailer assented.

Then the flask and cup were passed through the bars to the half-breed, and he took a drink; and he was careful, too, to do it in such a way that the others could see that the whisky really went down his throat.

After this the jailer and his friend had a drink.

If Jack Mason had any suspicions they were dispelled.

After the jailer got through he handed the flask and cup to Morton, and he carelessly put the flask in his pocket and set the cup down on the table.

"Hold on, hold on, what are you about?" the half-breed exclaimed.

"What is the matter?" Morton asked.

"I thought you brought that whisky for me, and you have shoved it into your pocket again!" the prisoner replied.

"So I did! Excuse me! I wasn't thinking of what I was about just at the moment," Morton explained, and then, right before the eyes of the jailer and his friend, he took the flask out of his pocket and handed it, with the tin cup, through the bars to the half-breed.

There was apparently no chance for deception, and the thought that there was anything wrong about the proceeding never entered the minds of Mason or Doyle.

But Morton had a secret inside pocket in his overcoat, right back of the regular one, and from this pocket came the second flask, only about half full of liquor.

He had shrewdly calculated that the first bout would dispose of half the quantity contained in the flask.

And after the trick was worked, Morton took his departure as soon as he possibly could without exciting suspicion.

The jailer and his friend returned to their cards, and the half-breed brought his box to the window, which was a low one, and sitting down beside it, watched the game.

The minutes passed rapidly away; the play at first was quite even, but, as midnight approached, the jailer began to lose; luck ran altogether in favor of his antagonist, and as he lost stake after stake, Jack Mason declared that he never saw such a run of bad cards.

"Say, old man, I will take a drink to your better fortune!" exclaimed the half-breed, and he let the liquor from the flask gurggle into the cup, making that pleasing melody so entrancing to the ears of a man who is fond of the juice of John Barleycorn.

Then, in a dextrous manner, he contrived to spill the liquor on his leggins, so that the falling drops would make no noise; this done, he pretended to drink the contents of the cup, smacking his lips afterward as though he much enjoyed the taste of the liquor.

As he had shrewdly anticipated, the thirst of the others was excited at once.

"Never mind drinking my luck!" Jack Mason exclaimed. "Let me take a whack at the whisky and git some luck for myself!"

"An' while ye are about it, ye might as well have me have a suck, so that some of the luck will be afther coming my way!" Doyle cried.

"All right! but I say, boys, don't drink it all up; leave a swallow for me," the half-breed remarked, as he passed the flask and cup through the bars.

"A pint bottle—a measly pint!" the jailer exclaimed, as he poured out a liberal allowance in the cup. "Why didn't he bring a quart while he was about it? W'ot good is a pint for three sich gen'lemen as we ar'?"

And then, with a fierce joy swelling his heart, the brigand beheld his jailer swallow the drugged liquor.

Doyle followed suit, taking equally as big a drink.

Then Jack Mason held the flask up to the light so as to ascertain how much remained.

"I say, pards, thar is enuff more for a small drink apiece for all three on us," he remarked.

"Hadt we better go on and finish the thing while we are about it?"

"All right, I'm agreeable," the prisoner replied. "It is about time for me to take a snooze anyway."

"Sart'in! that's so."

Then the pair took another drink apiece and Mason returned the flask and cup to the brigand, who pretended to drink the rest of the liquor.

"The stuff has made me sleepy, so I'm off for the night," the prisoner remarked with a yawn; then he laid down on his buffalo-robe.

The pair returned to their game, but after playing for a few minutes the jailer began to yawn.

"Say, Mickey, I reckon I will take a lay-out for awhile, if you will keep your eyes on the galoot in thar—not that thar is much need of it, for he is locked in all right, and couldn't git out if thar wasn't anybody in hyer."

"Yis, sur, I will be afther kaping me eyes on him," Doyle replied, at the same time so drowsy that he could hardly sit up straight.

There was a buffalo-robe in a corner of the room; the jailer took off the rough coat he wore, rolled it up for a pillow, and in a couple of minutes was fast asleep.

Doyle nodded at the table until he saw that Mason was well under the influence of the drowsy god, and then he rose from the table and made his way with cautious steps to the buffalo-robe.

"Plase the pigs! I might as well lay me down for awhile. I can kape me eyes open just as well as by sitting forninst the table," he remarked.

But the Irishman had hardly stretched himself upon the robe when he was fast asleep.

The brigand had kept a watchful eye upon the pair, and after they were both down, he waited until satisfied that they were well under the influence of the powerful drug which had been so deftly administered.

Then he rose, got out his saws and commenced work upon one of the window-bars; they were so far apart that the removal of a single bar would afford room for him to pass through.

It did not take long for the keen tool to sever the stout oak bar.

The brigand gained the outer apartment, then he stripped off his Indian dress, took the jailer's hat and coat—which he dexterously removed from under his head—then relieved him of his weapons.

When attired in Jack Mason's coat and hat, being about the same size as the jailer, he was likely to be mistaken for him in the darkness.

To the door he advanced; the road to freedom was open.

CHAPTER XXIX.

ON THE PRAIRIE.

THE brigand opened the door and passed through, closing it behind him.

He did not act cautiously, or with stealth, but just as Jack Mason might himself have done, if he had taken the notion into his head to come out for a few moments for the purpose of getting a mouthful of fresh air.

It was now about one o'clock, and the town was perfectly quiet; all the stores were closed, and the inhabitants in bed.

The brigand sauntered slowly up the street toward the spot where he had been warned that the horse would be tied.

The steed was there.

He stood for a moment and looked at it, just as the jailer would have been apt to have done, speculating as to what late bird had left his least there.

There was a moon, but it was on the wane, and although it afforded light enough to enable any one to see what they were about, yet it was not strong enough for a watcher, who was concealed on the other side of the street, in the shadow of a house, to detect that the man who had come from the jail was not Jack Mason.

Well was it for the brigand that he had fore-

thought enough to assume the jailer's coat and hat, for if he had not done so, he would have been pounced upon before he had gone five feet from the door, for the calaboose was surrounded by a guard of watchers.

Front and rear, and on both sides, armed men kept watch upon the building.

This was due to Dick Talbot, the Ranch King. Now that the game was in the net, he did not mean that it should escape if he could prevent it.

But, thanks to the disguise which the brigand had been cunning enough to assume, he reached the side of the horse without exciting the suspicions of the watchers, but when he unfastened the animal and mounted, then the sentinels thought there was something wrong, and they sprung from their hiding-places.

The brigand was sheltered by the horse, so they could not get a shot at him, and they dashed forward in order to intercept him.

"Aha! they are after me!" Bernal cried, and then giving heel to the horse, he rode behind the house and off over the open prairie, which extended from the town in that direction.

With his left hand he guided the horse; in his right he held a cocked revolver, although it did not seem likely that a foe would be encountered on the open prairie.

The precaution was a wise one, for as the brigand passed in the rear of the jail, a dark form, which had been stretched out at full length on the ground, lying on a rubber poncho, rose and blazed away at the fugitive with a revolver.

Anticipating a shot, the brigand bent low in the saddle, just as the report came, and so saved his life, for the bullet whistled over his head. Had he been erect it would have buried itself in his breast.

Bernal took a snap shot at his assailant, and, with a cry which seemed to show that he had been badly wounded, the man went down.

On over the prairie the fugitive rode at the best speed of his steed.

The Ranch King in person, who had been on the watch below the jail, came dashing around the corner of the building.

He was armed with a Winchester rifle.

Dropping upon one knee, he drew a bead on the horseman, whose figure was clearly outlined against the sky; then a second thought came to him and he lowered his aim to the horse.

By disabling the steed the capture of the rider was rendered almost certain, for even if he was not disabled by the fall, which he was pretty certain to get, he could not hope to offer successful resistance to the force which was after him.

The shot was a difficult one, owing to the distance and the uncertain light, but with such a marksman as Dick Talbot the odds were ten to one that he would not miss.

Deliberately he took aim, pulled the trigger and—

The rifle missed fire!

A defective cartridge saved Bernal, the brigand.

Before the Ranch King could recock the weapon, the fugitive, urging his horse to its topmost speed, was so far away that the odds were great now against a successful shot in so uncertain a light.

Dick Talbot sent a bullet after the fugitive, though, but it went wide of the mark, and Bernal, crouching low in the saddle, so as to expose as little of himself as possible to the fire of his pursuers, vanished in the gloom.

The scheme had succeeded, and the brigand was a free man again.

CHAPTER XXX.

AN INVESTIGATION.

THERE were five men, besides the Ranch King, who had been on the watch, and Mud Turtle was included in the number.

It was the Indian chief who had lain out on the prairie and had risen to intercept the fugitive.

By the time that the Ranch King managed to fire his shot, the cowboys had gathered in his rear.

No one had anticipated that the prisoner would endeavor to make his escape on horseback, and so the ranchmen had not provided themselves with steeds.

"It is no use, boys!" Dick Talbot exclaimed, springing to his feet after firing his shot. "He has beaten us this time, and I am afraid the scoundrel has badly wounded Mud Turtle!"

Then the Ranch King hastened to where the Indian lay upon the ground, the cowboys following him, all anxious to see how it was with the dauntless red chief.

As Dick Talbot came up to the side of Mud Turtle, he rose to a sitting posture, passed his hand slowly over the top of his head, from which the blood was streaming freely, and then, in a sudden burst of rage, he cried:

"Darn—son-of-a-gun!" and then he swore at the Mexican in so fluent a manner that even an experienced mule-driver would have been apt to turn green with envy.

It was plain that, notwithstanding the flow of blood, which so badly stained his face, Mud Turtle had not received a serious hurt.

When Talbot came to examine, he found that the bullet of the fugitive had grazed the top of the head, reopening the wound made by the club in the hands of Big Pete.

It had produced a shock which had caused the Indian to sink under it as though badly hurt, but now that the stunning sensation had passed away, he was all right again.

"Old fellow, I was sorely afraid you were done for when I saw you go down," Talbot exclaimed.

"Mud Turtle skin that fox when he catch 'um!" the chief announced. "Skin Big Pete first, though."

"Yes, I reckon that to-morrow we will have to ask him to walk up to the captain's office and settle," Talbot remarked.

"Mud Turtle settle him, you bet!" the Indian declared, with great dignity.

The discharge of the shots at this unusual hour had disturbed some of the citizens, and when the Ranch King and his men returned to the calaboose they met a group hurrying to that point.

There was the mayor, the marshal, his deputy and Skipper Bill, of the Silver Ship.

The four had been indulging in a "little game," and as it had proved to be unusually interesting, they had sat late over their cards, and when disturbed by the shots had lost no time in hurrying to the street.

They recognized the Ranch King and his cowboy—the two parties met right in front of the calaboose.

"Well, well, what is up?" the mayor exclaimed.

"The prisoner has escaped!" Dick Talbot replied.

"You don't say so!" cried the marshal, angrily.

"Yes, there is no mistake about it," the Ranch King replied. "I had an idea that the fellow would try to break jail, and so I put a watch on the calaboose. But he played a sharp game and managed to pull the wool over our eyes. In some way he got possession of Jack Mason's coat and hat, so, when he came out and walked carelessly up the street, we were all deceived into the belief that it was the jailer; there was a horse by the side of the house above—whether it was there by accident, or some pard of his had tied it so as to aid him to escape is a question, but the moment he mounted the beast we came to the conclusion there was something wrong, and started for him. It was too late, though, and he managed to get off."

"This beats me!" the marshal exclaimed.

"If there was a man in this town whom I thought could be trusted, Jack Mason was the galoot!"

"Well, let us go in and hear what he has to say for himself," the Ranch King suggested.

"Yes; and Doyle was with him, too; and Doyle is a good man, as sharp and shrewd and as honest a fellow as there is in Arizona!" the mayor declared.

"It is mighty strange how the trick was worked; but let us examine into the matter," Dick Talbot remarked.

The door of the calaboose being open, they had no difficulty in entering, and the astonishment of the party when they discovered the pair sound asleep on the buffalo-robe was great.

"Wa-al, darn my pictur', if this don't beat all I ever see'd or heard tell on!" the marshal exclaimed in a rage, as he surveyed the sleeping men in deep disgust.

Dick Talbot noticed that one of the bars of the window was missing, and upon examination saw that it had been severed by a saw, so he called his companion's attention to it.

"Well, well! it is perfectly plain now!" the mayor declared. "The watchers fell asleep, and the fellow took advantage of the fact to escape. He must have had a small saw concealed on his person. I am glad to discover that neither Mason nor Doyle aided him to escape."

"I don't understand about the saw," the Ranch King remarked. "For after his capture he was thoroughly searched, and I am sure he had no such thing when he was locked up, unless he had it so cunningly concealed that it escaped the inspection."

"Some pard may have smuggled it in to him," the marshal observed.

"That may be the way of it," Dick Talbot assented.

"But this hyer biz of these durned galoots going to sleep, when both on 'em had been snoozing 'bout all day, and 'lowed they wouldn't close their eyes, is w'ot gits me!" the marshal exclaimed.

"Git up, thar, darn ye!" he yelled.

And in his wrath, he gave the sleeping men a couple of hearty kicks apiece; but, to the astonishment of all the party, they never stirred, although the kicks were violent enough to wake one of the seven sleepers.

"Hallo, hallo!" the Ranch King cried; "there is something wrong here. This is no natural sleep!"

And then they shook the sleepers in the roughest kind of way.

At last both of them opened their eyes and made a movement to sit up.

"You darned galoots! w'ot do yer mean by

this hyer business?" the wrathful marshal demanded.

The pair rolled their eyes around in a dazed manner for a moment, and then laid down again, evidently not in a condition to either understand or reply to the question.

"There has been foul play here!" the Ranch King exclaimed. "These men act as if they had been drugged."

The rest agreed to this.

"Let us search and see if we can find anything," the mayor suggested.

This was done, and the tin cup discovered in the prisoner's apartment—he had carried the flask off with him.

A few drops of whisky still clung to the cup, and Dick Talbot called the attention of the others to it.

"This shows that they had liquor!" the Ranch King exclaimed. "The way the trick was worked is perfectly plain now. Some pard gave the half-breed a bottle of whisky—it was drugged, and the two men were fools enough to drink it."

"That is it!" the marshal cried. "May I be durned if I didn't think Jack Mason had more sense than to be caught by such a shallow trick! Why, gentlemen, a ten-year-old boy ought to have more sense!"

"It is idle to waste time in speculating about the matter," Dick Talbot remarked. "When these fellows recover from the effects of the dose, we will be able to learn the particulars. As the marshal says, it does seem extremely strange that an old-stager like Jack Mason could be taken into camp so easily."

It was after eight in the morning, though, before the men woke from their slumber so as to be able to give any account of themselves.

Both of them protested that they never had such a headache before in their lives, and the quantity of water which they swallowed was astonishing.

When they recovered their senses they gave a clear account of all that had occurred, but scoffed indignantly at the idea that the whisky they drank had been drugged, for they declared that the prisoner and the speculator who brought the flask had drank from it as well as they.

The Ranch King suggested that Mr. Morton be requested to come over to the jail.

The examination was taking place in the calaboose, and only the mayor, the marshal, Dick Talbot, Doc Brown, who had been summoned as a medical expert, and the jailers, were present.

Morton soon appeared, and the mayor explained the matter to him.

The speculator professed to be much astonished; said he hoped that they did not suspect that he had anything to do with aiding the half-breed to escape; explained that he knew absolutely nothing about the man, but had been summoned from the hotel by Jack Mason to see the prisoner in regard to a mine which he wished to sell.

The jailer said this was true; the half-breed had asked him to buy the mine, and he had suggested Mr. Morton.

Morton said he bought the whisky at the bar of the hotel and had told Skipper Bill that he was going to carry it to the prisoner, and had come straight from the bar of the hotel to the jail.

He corroborated Jack Mason's statement that they had all had a drink from the bottle, and declared he had not experienced any ill effects from it.

"I assure you, gentlemen, my business with the man was all fair and above-board," he said, in conclusion. "Here is my contract for the mine, and I can show you the property which Mr. Bledstone, my partner, and myself, examined yesterday before we closed the negotiation."

The mayor assured the gentleman that his explanation was perfectly satisfactory, and Mr. Morton departed.

"I told you the whisky was all right!" Jack Mason exclaimed.

"Oh, nonsense!" the doctor declared, in his abrupt way. "Did you ever sleep so before in your lives?"

The pair were obliged to admit that they never did.

"You were drugged; no doubt about it at all," Doc Brown exclaimed. "Some preparation of opium, I think, but where the deuce the fellow got it from is a mystery, unless he carries a vial around in his clothes. After he got hold of the flask he introduced the drug to the liquor, and the last drinks you took was what settled the hash of you two fellows."

The pair admitted, reluctantly, that this might be the truth.

"Wa-al, if anybody brought the stuff to the half-breed, it was that Big Pete galoot!" Jack Mason declared.

"One of my men has a crow to pick with him," the Ranch King remarked. "My Indian, Mud Turtle, was assaulted and nearly killed by the ruffian, and he wants satisfaction."

"Well, gentlemen, I really think that Big Pete and his place are getting to be considerable

of a nuisance, for it is the resort of the worst men in the town, but, I presume, it will bring on a bloody bit of work if I should attempt to close it up."

"I reckon the mayor is 'bout right thar," the marshal coincided. "Big Pete and his gang are fighters from 'way back."

"Mr. Mayor, all I ask of you in this matter is to keep your hands off, and let Big Pete and Mud Turtle settle this affair in their own way. If he has a gang, the Indian is not without friends," Dick Talbot observed.

"Oh, that is all right!" the mayor declared. "Go ahead! If you clean out the place it will be a benefit to the town!"

This ended the conference.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MUD TURTLE'S CHALLENGE.

As reported in a previous chapter, the news the unprovoked assault that the keeper of the Hotel de Sonora had committed upon the Indian excited a great deal of angry talk in the town.

The excuse that Big Pete offered—that the red-skin was drunk and ugly—did not "go down" with the townsmen; they plainly declared that the Mexican lied, and there was lots of talk about calling upon the Vigilantes to rise and "purify" the town.

And now that the half-breed had succeeded in escaping, the citizens were more incensed against the saloon-keeper than ever, and many a time the good old adage, "birds of a feather flock together," was repeated to show that Big Pete was no better than he ought to be.

The half-breed had fled, evidently not daring to remain and stand trial, and the citizens, almost to a man, were satisfied in regard to his guilt.

It was openly charged, too, that Big Pete had aided him to escape, and when the report went around town that the Indian intended to challenge the Mexican to come out and fight him like a man, excitement was at fever-heat.

The Ranch King was one of those men who do not believe in putting off until to-morrow what can be done to-day, and so he advised Mud Turtle to lose no time in sending a challenge to the Mexican.

Dick Talbot had his head-quarters at the Silver Ship, and there the preparation for the sending of the challenge was made.

The citizens were all astir for the fight, and about all business was suspended in the town.

Word was brought that Big Pete, being warned there was trouble ahead, had filled his house with a gang of the worst men in the town, and there was a prospect of lively times. It was reported, too, that the Mexican had declared he would shoot the Ranch King or any of his cowboys on sight if they dared to approach his house.

"Mud Turtle, you will have to send your challenge by a neutral party, then," the Ranch King remarked, when this declaration of the Mexican desperado was reported to him.

"I reckon I better take it," the marshal said. "I want to give Big Pete a word or two of advice, for I don't believe he understands how things are working, and he ought to, you know."

The mayor had discreetly retired. He had taken possession of a second story room in the hotel, the window of which commanded a view of what would be apt to be the battle-ground if a fight took place.

"Well, I reckon you would be the best man to bear the message," Dick Talbot remarked. "Mud Turtle wants satisfaction, and he will fight Big Pete in any way and with any weapons that he chooses, it doesn't make any difference to the Indian."

"That is as fair as fair can be!" the marshal declared. "And I don't see how any man can object to a challenge like that, which allows him to have about everything his own way."

"That is the chief's say-so, and he will live up to it! All he wants is a chance to show this Mexican desperado that to hit an unsuspecting man on the head with a club is one thing, and to meet him in a fair fight, on equal terms, is another."

"All right; I will attend to it."

And then the marshal strode away in the direction of the Hotel de Sonora, which was down the street on the outskirts of the town.

The reports which were flying around the town in regard to Big Pete's warlike preparations were not exaggerated.

There were six hangdog-looking fellows in and around the saloon when the marshal approached, all armed to the teeth.

Big Pete himself sat in the doorway, a repeating-rifle upon his lap and a belt fairly bristling with weapons buckled around his waist.

"Wa-al, Pete, you look as if you were all ready for the war-path," the marshal remarked, as he halted in front of the desperado.

"I am prepared to defend myself if attacked!" the Mexican exclaimed.

"Wa-al, I should smile!" the marshal replied.

"But any man kin see that!"

"I am not going to be murdered in cold blood

by this Ranch King and his gang without a fight for my life!" Big Pete declared.

"It ain't the Ranch King, but the Injun w'ot is arter yer."

"It is all the same!"

"Oh, no; the red-skin is hankering after a fair fight. He says you hit him on the head and laid him out when he wasn't expecting it, and now he is arter satisfaction."

"And do you bring this message from him?"

"Yes, I am kinder trying to be neutral in this hyer affair; and you know w'ot our rules are in a case of this sort. When two gentlemen quarrel it is allowable for them to fight it out, and that is w'ot the red-skin is arter. He challenges you to a fair fight, and you kin pick out w'ot weapons you like—he is willing to agree to anything."

"The cursed red hound is very kind!" Big Pete exclaimed, in contempt. "If he wants to fight me let him come here and I will give him all the fighting he wants."

"Then you do not keer to meet him in a fair fight?"

"No, I would not so honor the red dog!"

"Now, Pete, if you will take my advice you will meet him; the citizens are riled over this affair, and if the Indian gits his friends together to attack you hyer the chances are big that you will have a reg'lar army to face."

"My house is strong, my men brave, and I can whip the whole town if they dare to attack me!" Big Pete declared, arrogantly.

"Wa-al, old man, if you want to butt your head ag'in' a stone wall, all right! I see that you hain't got any idea of how the town feels 'bout this matter, but you will find out afore you git through, I reckon."

"So long! I'll help to plant you decently arter the thing is over," and the marshal retraced his steps.

"American brutes, I defy you!" cried the Mexican.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE ATTACK.

WHEN the marshal returned and faithfully reported the conversation between himself and Big Pete, the citizens fairly went wild.

That the Mexican desperado should dare to bid defiance to the whole town enraged them greatly, and the men of Silveropolis were not at all "backward in coming forward" to express their sentiments in regard to the matter.

Just as only a few days ago they were all eager to volunteer to teach the ranchers that they must not expect to ride over the town, now they were equally ready to aid the Ranch King to crush the Mexican desperado.

"Well, Mr. Marshal, since this party will not come out and fight like a man, but prefers to shut himself up in his house with a gang of ruffians, and thinks he is able to bid defiance to all efforts to call him to an account, I propose to teach him that he is not so powerful as he thinks," the Ranch King remarked.

"It is all right, Mr. Talbot, you can go ahead as far as I am concerned," Livingstone said. "I wash my hands of the matter. I gave the galoot a chance to settle the thing like a gentleman, but he wouldn't have it, and if thar is a skirmish, and he gits hurt, he won't have nobody or nothing to blame but himself."

"Pile in, Mr. Ranch King, and I will go upstairs and take a reserved seat in the private-box with the mayor, so as to have a good chance to see the show."

And then the marshal disappeared in the Silver Ship.

Dick Talbot had ten of his cowboys with him including the Indian, Mud Turtle, and the irrepressible Dandy Jim, The-Man-from-Red-Dog. The red-bearded giant, with a couple more, had arrived in the morning.

About all the male citizens of Silveropolis were congregated in the neighborhood; business in the town was entirely suspended, for the citizens understood that they were to witness as desperate a fight as had ever taken place since Silveropolis had a local habitation and a name.

Some of the fiery speeches made by the townsmen in regard to Big Pete had reached the Ranch King's ears, and he judged it wise to make a little speech to them in regard to the matter.

"Gentlemen, if you will give me your kind attention for a few minutes I have a few words that I would like to say to you."

"Yes! yes!" cried a dozen voices.

"Bully for you! wade in and put it to 'em like a man and a brother!" cried The-Man-from-Red-Dog.

There were a good many of the citizens who looked askance at the Red-Dogite.

The trick he had played upon them in regard to the lynch business was still fresh in their memory, and they felt a little sore over the matter.

And few of them had ventured to express their opinion to Dandy Jim that his conduct had not been—to put it mildly—just according to Hoyle, but the red-bearded giant had put on one of his broad grins, and asked them if they didn't consider it right for a man to stick to his pard, and if he wasn't justified in resorting to any trick to

get him out of a tight place, winding up with the remark:

"If I have done anything that I ought to be sorry for I am glad of it, and if I haven't played the game according to Hoyle I am willing to be forgiven!"

And he was so good-natured about the matter that none of the complainants felt inclined to pick a quarrel with him. Possibly the size and warlike appearance of The-Man-from-Red-Dog had something to do with this.

A chair was brought and Talbot stood up on it while a crowd gathered near, anxious to hear what he had to say.

"Gentlemen, I don't suppose it is necessary for me to go into the particulars of this trouble, for all of you here must be acquainted with the details. Suffice it to say that this Mexican desperado, Big Pete, the owner of the Hotel de Sonora, assaulted my Indian, Mud Turtle, without reason, and if his head hadn't been as hard as a brickbat, undoubtedly he would have been killed. When he was stunned he was thrown like a dog into a cellar to die, and, fellow-citizens, I reckon that no man within the sound of my voice can tell how many victims have met their death in that same cellar."

This was a telling point. The citizens looked at each other and shook their heads.

Men under the influence of liquor had mysteriously disappeared from time to time; they had been traced to the Hotel de Sonora, but no further, and in every one of these cases the man was known to have had considerable money on his person.

But as no bodies had ever been discovered—the existence of a cellar under the house had never been suspected—the town had believed the Mexican's story that the men had departed at a late hour and he knew nothing about them.

"Mud Turtle was and is willing to meet this Mexican murderer in a fair fight, man to man, and so secure the atonement he desires, but Big Pete has gathered a force of desperadoes around him, refuses a fair fight and defies the town."

"Now, fellow-citizens, the Indian has friends here who are going to see him through. We are going to clean out the Hotel de Sonora and the gang of cut-throats who have made it their headquarters, and if there is any gentleman here who feels like chipping in and aiding the good cause, we shall be very glad of his assistance."

There was a moment's silence and then the citizens cheered, and twenty-five or thirty hastened to volunteer.

"All right! much obliged, gentlemen!" Dick Talbot exclaimed. "Have the kindness to draw off to the right of the house all you who are going into this thing, and the rest, who propose to act as spectators had better get out of the street and secure cover, or else they will be as liable to step bullets as we men who are in the war, for within ten minutes I anticipate the skirmish will begin."

This was good advice; the crowd understood that it was, and they began to scatter.

Those who had volunteered went to the right of the hotel with the Ranch King's cowboys, and the others sought eligible positions from whence they could see the fight, without being in danger of getting hit by a stray ball.

"Now, gentlemen, there isn't much use for a man to join in this picnic unless he has a rifle, for it is not likely we will come to such close quarters as to call for revolver-work."

There were a few without rifles, and they hurried off to procure them; there were plenty of citizens who possessed rifles, yet cared not to engage in the fight, but were glad to lend their weapons.

When the volunteers returned, the Ranch King divided his force into four squads; he took command of one, The-Man-from-Red-Dog, Mud Turtle and Tom Martin of the others.

From his fortress Big Pete had a view of the preparations, and understanding that the Ranch King meant business, he prepared for a desperate resistance.

The doors were closed and barricaded, the windows, too, boarded up, loopholes being left so the desperadoes could fire through them.

And after the preparations were made, Big Pete cried, grimly:

"Now let them come! We will make them wade in blood before they get us out of this!"

Talbot noticed that the Mexican had turned his house into a regular fortress, and he observed to his men, when some of them remarked, with a shake of the head, that it looked as if the desperadoes meant to give a bloody fight:

"Now, gentlemen, don't make any mistake about this thing. I am not going to waste any lives in attempting to carry the house by assault. I esteem the life of any man of you to be far too precious to idly sacrifice it. Any man here is worth a dozen of these cowardly Mexican cut-throats. I am going to have them out of their hole, though, and force them to give us a fair fight in the open!"

Then Talbot proceeded to dispose his forces so as to completely surround the Hotel de Sonora.

On the town side Mud Turtle and his men were posted, sheltered by the houses, and the

other three parties were drawn out on the prairie, just out of rifle-range of Big Pete's men.

When the forces were in position, the Ranch King discharged a signal shot in the air.

Then Mud Turtle proceeded to "get in his work."

Provided with an Indian bow and arrows—the arrow-heads having cotton wrapped around them, saturated with alcohol—he began to launch balls of fire against the Hotel de Sonora, directing the flight of the arrows so they would lodge on the roof.

Inside of five minutes the house was on fire!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE END OF THE SKIRMISH.

THE Hotel de Sonora was a two-storied, wooden structure, old and weather-beaten, and as there had been no rain for a month it was in a condition to burn like tinder.

There was no way of reaching the steep, double-pitched roof from the inside, no scuttle, and when the Mexicans essayed to get at the fire by chopping a hole in the roof and sending a man out to extinguish the burning brands, the attacking force opened so hot a fire upon the house, that not a man within dared venture to show himself.

Big Pete raged within the doomed house like a maniac.

He felt that he was caught like a rat in a trap.

His followers were cowed too by this unexpected attack, and he could see that they were no longer to be depended upon.

"Aha, you cowards!" he cried, "you have had the steel taken out of you, eh? You no longer dare to fight these cursed Americans!"

"What is the use of a man rushing to certain death?" one of them cried, sulkily, acting as spokesman for the rest. "We are whipped, and there is no doubt about it. If the attack was made on us here in the house, there might be some chance for us, but to go out and fight in the open—bah! we should only be shot down like dogs!"

"And if we stay here we shall be roasted alive!" added another.

"What would you do?" cried Big Pete.

"Surrender before we are all killed!" the man replied.

"By all the saints! I swear I will never surrender!" the Mexican desperado exclaimed in a perfect frenzy of rage.

"Why should we give up our lives in your quarrel?" cried a third one of the gang. "If you had accepted the Indian's offer and met him in a fair fight, as you ought to have done, we would not have been caught in this hole, like rats in a trap!" cried the first man who had spoken.

Big Pete looked upon the sullen, discontented men for a moment, and from their faces he understood that there was not one of them whom he could depend upon to stand by him.

"Aha! you think I ought to have met this red-skinned dog?" he cried.

"Yes, yes!" cried the others, like a chorus.

"It is not too late; go forth, you cowards! Tell them that you surrender and I am willing to meet this red savage in single combat with a knife, if he dares to face me!"

The men did not wait to be told a second time, but unbarred the door and streamed forth, the first one tying a white rag to his rifle as a flag of truce, and the rest holding their guns up above their heads as a signal that they had surrendered.

Talbot was in such a position that he commanded a view of the front of the house, and when he saw that the foe had surrendered, he signaled to his men and they closed in rapidly.

Mud Turtle and his force made their appearance from behind the houses where they had found shelter.

"We surrender!" yelled the foremost Mexican, who bore the white flag, when Talbot came up.

"Where is Big Pete?" demanded the Ranch King, immediately noticing the absence of the desperado.

"Oh, he will not surrender, and he dares your Indian to meet him in single combat with a knife."

Mud Turtle had come up just in time to hear the challenge, and his dark eyes flashed fire as he cried:

"Let the Mexican dog come out of his hole and the red chief will cut his heart out!"

And those who knew the brawny warrior felt that he was not giving utterance to an idle boast.

No better man with the knife than the Black-foot chief had ever stepped foot on Western soil.

Then out from the burning house rushed Big Pete, knife in hand, his eyes flaming with the fury of despair.

The citizens, comprehending that all danger from stray bullets was over, came in haste from their places of shelter eager to behold the fight.

The antagonists faced each other.

The Mexican was a large man, hence his name, Big Pete, but in muscular development he could not compare with the red chief.

With the cautious tread of the tiger-cat the

two came nearer and nearer; suddenly the Mexican sprung upon the Indian, and with a desperate lunge endeavored to bury his knife in the breast of the red-skin.

Mud Turtle parried the stroke with wonderful dexterity; then, with a swift, lightning-like movement, he cut Big Pete over the knuckles, disabling him so that the knife dropped from his hand.

A yell of fiendish rage went up on the air from the throat of the Mexican desperado.

It was his last cry on earth, for the next instant the knife of the Indian pierced his heart.

He beat the air for a moment with his hands, and then sunk lifeless to the earth.

Justice had at last overtaken the Mexican desperado after a life of crime.

And now that the struggle was ended, some of the citizens suggested that an endeavor be made to save the Hotel de Sonora from the flames, but they soon discovered that all efforts were useless.

The fire had got such headway that it was not possible to put it out.

As the house was some distance from any other, there was no danger of the fire spreading, and so it was suffered to burn to the ground, which it did in a remarkably short space of time.

"It is no loss!" was the common remark. "It has always been a den of the worst kind ever since it existed!"

After the death of Big Pete, the Mexicans wanted to know what was going to be done with them.

"Well, I have nothing against you as far as I am concerned," the Ranch King replied. "You merely stood up for your countryman, and I do not lay it up against you. You were wise enough to surrender when you saw that you stood no show, and that is a point in your favor."

The marshal, who was standing by, thought this was a good opportunity for him to put in a word.

"Now, see hyer, boys, this ought to be a lesson to you fellows!" he declared. "If Big Pete had behaved himself he would have been alive now, but he didn't, and jest see how he's been laid out. You have all been kinder mixed up with him, and you had better walk mighty straight in future."

The Mexicans, being thoroughly cowed, swore that they would make the best of citizens, then slunk away.

The townsmen went back to their avocations, the cowboys departed, and Silveropolis resumed its usual appearance.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE DOCTOR SPEAKS.

OR the Ranch King's party, only Talbot and the Indian remained in the town.

And Talbot would not have stayed had not Doc Brown taken an opportunity to whisper quietly in his ear that he would like to have a few words with him in private.

Since this series of attacks had been made upon him, the Ranch King had resolved that he would not go about without some trusty friend at his elbow, and of all his men he placed most faith in the red chief, and therefore told Mud Turtle to wait for him.

Leaving the Indian in the saloon, where Mud Turtle was compelled to hold a regular levee—which, as it involved the disposal of quite a number of drinks, was not at all displeasing to the red chief, who was extremely partial to the fire-water of the white men—the Ranch King followed the doctor to his apartment, which was on the second story of the hotel.

Talbot was quick to comply with Doc Brown's request, for he had a high opinion of that gentleman.

Brown was an able man, and had it not been for his unfortunate love for liquor, would have taken high rank in any community.

The Ranch King was a man of vast experience, and, when he became acquainted with the doctor, realized that he was a superior man.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable, Mr. Talbot," said the doctor, after they were in the room and the door closed behind them. "Have a cigar?" and Brown produced a couple.

After they were lighted, and well under way, the doctor began:

"I suppose you reckon that I haven't brought you up here for nothing?"

"Yes, for I take you to be a man who will neither waste his own time nor that of anybody else."

"Well, as to my own time, it is about as worthless as I am," the doctor replied, dryly. "But I am going to talk business. I have become a good deal interested in these little incidents which have put you in such hot water lately."

"Is that so?"

"Yes; I presume you have stumbled across the knowledge in your travels that almost every man who has a profession has a sneaking idea that he would do a great deal better at something else?"

"Yes; I believe that is so with a great many," Talbot replied.

"Well, I am one of the great many. Now, I

have always been counted a pretty fair doctor, but in my own opinion I would have made a much better fist of it as a lawyer or detective."

"Is that possible?"

"Yes; my tastes have always run in that direction; both professions, as you will see upon thinking the matter over, chiefly depend upon the ability to group together scattered things and make a whole out of them."

"Undoubtedly that is correct."

"So in this affair of yours I have gone in to do a little detective work."

"Well, to my thinking it is a case that demands considerable skill."

"Not a doubt of that!" the doctor declared.

"Now, to begin at the beginning, I was certain, right from the start, that you had no hand in the killing of the Maverick Man."

"Yet the proof seemed to be strong against me," the Ranch King remarked, with a smile.

"Not strong at all to a man with any detective or lawyer instincts," Brown replied.

"What was the proof?—you had thrashed the fellow in the morning; that was a reason for him to kill you, not you to slay him."

"Your knife was found in the wound. If you had done the deed you would not have been idiot enough to run away and leave your knife behind, when you had plenty of time to take it with you."

"That point is well taken."

"Then the dying words of the man indicated that he had recognized his murderer and believed that he could have fought him successfully if he had not been taken unawares. After his extremely unsatisfactory experience in the morning the man would hardly have thought that in regard to you."

"That is very true."

"Then the testimony of the half-breed cowboy, who happened to be so conveniently near at hand; he saw the blow struck, could not see the man though so as to be able to identify him, but could the horse—your horse, which he described to a hair. It was a cunning trick to fix the crime on you without swearing point-blank against you; the idea was to pose as an honest and disinterested witness."

"You have reached the same conclusion to which I came."

"Yes; but it is safe to say that now there is hardly a man in the town who would be willing to hang a yaller dog on the oath of that same cowboy."

"His reputation has suffered."

"Now, then, to come back to the death of Mexican Mike: Why was he killed?—what could any one gain by his death? That lets you out right away; the life or death of the man made no difference to you. But the fact that the killing was so arranged as to make it appear that you had a hand in it, gives a motive for the murder. The Maverick Man was killed so as to make trouble for you."

"It seems so, and yet is it possible that a life would be taken on such slight grounds?"

"Hold on a moment! Mike knew his killer, and from his disjointed words it would appear as if there had been trouble between them. Now comes in a double motive: first, revenge; second, to strike a blow at you."

"I believe you have hit it," the Ranch King observed, thoughtfully.

"Now then, what foe, or foes, had the Maverick Man?"

"The question is easily answered. He was one of the brigand band of Fernando Bernal, and when the prisoners were delivered into the hands of the Mexican authorities, after I destroyed the band, he turned State's evidence and his testimony convicted his comrades and saved his own neck."

"Exactly! any man of that brigand band who escaped death was justified, according to their code, in killing the traitor upon the first convenient opportunity."

"So if one of the brigands killed the Maverick Man and contrived the murder so as to fix the crime upon you, he was killing two birds with one stone, for you incurred the hatred of the rascals by breaking up their band."

"Very true. But you haven't told me anything new yet," the Ranch King remarked. "I arrived at these conclusions some time ago, and furthermore I am satisfied that the half-breed is one of Fernando Bernal's brigands, and, in fact, from the ability the man has displayed, I am beginning to have a suspicion that it may be Fernando Bernal himself in disguise."

"I understood he was shot at Guaymas."

"He was to be shot, but whether the sentence was executed or not is more than I can say; I have never heard that it was."

"Yes, but you captured Bernal!" Brown exclaimed. "Would you not be apt to recognize him?"

"Hardly; he was badly wounded in the fight and was covered with blood, his face blackened too with powder, and right after the capture I gave him up to the Mexicans, so I never really got a chance to see what the man looked like."

"It may be Bernal; most certainly the fellow is no slouch," Doc Brown declared.

"Now, as I haven't succeeded in astonishing

you I will try again, and this time I take up the escape of the half-breed."

"I confess I am puzzled about that," Talbot admitted. "Of course he drugged the two men, and it seems as if he must have got the drug from Big Pete, and yet he is not the kind of man who would be apt to have anything of the sort."

"The Mexican had nothing to do with it!" the doctor exclaimed, decidedly. "But I can put my hands on the man who did."

"You must mean this stranger—this speculator who calls himself Morton?"

"That is the man!"

"But why do you suppose he had ought to do with the matter?—because he came to see the half-breed about the mine?"

"That was a cunning trick to avoid suspicion. Mark! the half-breed tells Jack Mason he has a mine to sell; what more natural than for Mason to think of the strangers at the hotel who had said they were speculators, and when the half-breed spoke of the mine it was to give Mason a chance to introduce these men."

"It is done! There is a confab in the cell; the man goes away, returns late at night and brings whisky with him; they drink all around; that is to lull any suspicions the jailer might have. Then the flask is given to the prisoner, and the speculator departs. Pretty soon there is another round of drinks, and this time the watchers get the drugged liquor and it puts them to sleep; then away goes the half-breed!"

"There is a horse near at hand, all ready for him, and by the aid of the animal he makes his escape."

"And that horse was stolen from the hotel corral here; I discovered that," the Ranch King remarked.

"Yes, exactly, and it is an easy matter for any one acquainted with the corral to run out a horse; there is no lock on it, nor any watch kept. And that very afternoon, while I was in the corral attending to fitting a new saddle to my beast, the two strangers came there, and, under pretense of wanting a pair of horses to take a ride, examined the place and the horses."

"At the time it struck me that they were putting the hostler to a good deal of trouble in selecting horses, and were asking a lot of unnecessary questions, but it never occurred to me as to what they were about until after the half-breed escaped, and then, putting two and two together, you know, I came to the conclusion that their sole object in visiting the corral was to become familiar with it, and the horses, so as to be able to pick out a good one for the escape."

"Well, this is something that I did not know or suspect," the Ranch King remarked, thoughtfully. "I was not favorably impressed with the looks of either of the men, but then these speculators that travel around looking for paying chances don't usually amount to much."

"Another point! The drug used to fix the watchers was opium in some shape. Nothing else that I know of would have produced the effect it did, but the question at once comes up, where was the drug got?"

"Yes, that is a riddle."

"I have solved it."

"You have?" cried Talbot, in amazement.

"Yes, this man, Morton, is an opium-eater."

"Ah, yes, I have heard of such a thing."

"It is more common than people think for; not in a wild region like this, of course, for the stuff is not to be had; it is an accursed habit, far worse than drunkenness."

"And you think this man is addicted to it?"

"Yes, there are certain signs which to the experienced eyes of a well-trained physician indicate the opium or morphine fiend, as the men who are slaves to the habit are sometimes termed. This fellow has all the symptoms, and I would stake my professional reputation that I have not made a mistake. You see, I have been studying the pair intently ever since my suspicions were aroused. An opium-eater, coming to a wild country like this, where he knows he will not be able to get the drug, would be almost certain to carry a supply with him, so you see he had it all ready for use."

"Well, you have astonished me!" the Ranch King admitted. "But what possible connection can there be between two men, like these speculators—two Americans, and this half-breed, whether he is Fernando Bernal in disguise or some lesser one of the brigand band?"

"Ah! now you have asked me a question that I cannot answer; but I am just as certain that there is a connection between the two as that I am sitting here in this chair."

"The mystery is a deep one," Dick Talbot remarked, with a troubled brow.

"And, by the way, you spoke of them as being two Americans; but I don't think that this Morton is an American, although he has been long enough in this country to appear like a native; but once in a while he lets slip a word, which, from the peculiar way in which he pronounces it, makes me think he is an Englishman."

"Ah! an Englishman, eh?"

"And then back to the mind of the Ranch King came a remembrance of the past."

"Yes, I think so; I have given a great deal of study to nationalities, and have always prided

myself upon my ability to pick out from their peculiarities of speech the people of different countries."

"This Morton is an Englishman, I feel sure," the doctor continued. "A man of birth and education, too, although I suspect there is something of the black sheep about him. He is far superior in every way to his companion as far as building and education goes; the other fellow, I fancy, is nothing but a common gambler masquerading as a speculator."

The Ranch King gave a slight start.

"By Jove! doctor, I believe you have put me on the right scent!" he exclaimed.

"Is that so? Well, I am deuced glad of it!"

"Yes; a couple of years ago an Englishman and an American gambler went out of their way to attack me."

"Ah! this is getting interesting."

"First, they lay in wait and attempted to assassinate me, but the attack failed, and I laid the Englishman out with a revolver-ball, which went through the skull, as I thought, killing him instantly; but it afterward turned out it only grazed his head and merely stunned him. If he is the man there will be a scar there."

"I will see about that," the doctor exclaimed.

"The gamblers escaped by pretending that they had mistaken me for some one else. I thought it was probable, and so did not press my advantage; but afterward the pair hired a Mexican to kill me. I foiled the man and forced him to a confession. Then I started to hunt up these men who were attacking me without a reason, as far as I know, but they had fled and I never got on their track. I never saw them but once, then they were smoothly-shaven; but if the beards were taken from these two I should not be surprised if they proved to be my mysterious enemies."

"You are right, Talbot, for a thousand dollars!" the doctor cried. "And they have joined hands with this brigand to kill you!"

"It certainly looks like it!"

"Oh, we are on the right track now, beyond a doubt!" the Ranch King declared. "And here is another point which I will look into. This Black Dan Dutton. His challenge to me to fight a duel with him up the gulch was only a cunning trick to get me in a position so that the half-breed would have a chance to kill me."

"Oh, yes, that is correct."

"My impression was that the half-breed put Dutton up to this trick, but this stranger may have had a hand in the matter."

"Put it to Dutton!" cried the doctor. "Force him into a confession. I will go with you right away! I will make him tell the truth, or I will poison the rascal!"

Ten minutes later the pair were by the bedside of the wounded man.

CHAPTER XXXV.

DUTTON ON THE RACK.

LIKE the majority of men of his class, Black Dan Dutton spent his money as fast as he got it, and so when he was laid, helpless, upon his back he was obliged to depend upon the charity of his friends, and there is little doubt he would have suffered if the doctor, true to the instincts of his profession, had not "passed around the hat" for him.

"Don't you worry, man," he had said to Dutton, when he lamented his poverty, and "reckoned" he stood a good show of starving to death, "I will see that you do not suffer for anything you need. It is my private opinion that you are an unmitigated scoundrel," he added, with characteristic bluntness, "still I don't think you ought to be allowed to suffer and die like a dog for want of Christian care, so I will look out for you."

It was this knowledge of how much Black Dan was indebted to him that made Doc Brown so confident that he could get the fellow to confess.

The wounded man was surprised to see the Ranch King, and his face showed it.

To the doctor's question as to how he felt he "allowed" he was considerably better.

"Well, I am glad of that, for you have a little ordeal to go through now, and you will need strength, maybe," Doc Brown announced.

Black Dan Dutton opened his eyes widely and looked with apprehension upon his visitor.

"Sit down, Talbot, and make yourself comfortable, while I put this fellow on the rack," the doctor continued.

The Ranch King did so, taking a seat at the foot of the rude bunk upon which the wounded man lay, while Doc Brown sat near the head.

"Now, Dutton, old man, I am going to talk to you like a Dutch uncle," he declared. "I reckon you understand that if it hadn't been for me you would have had tough scratching for your life this time?"

"Oh, yes; I know that. The darned galoots who were allers so ready to help me spend my money when I had plenty, gi'n me the cold shoulder."

"You bet! that is the way of the world. The men who stick closest to you in the sunshine are always the first to go back on you when clouds come."

"I've got a lesson to last me all the rest of

my life. Money is a man's best friend, and he is a darned fool who don't hold on to it."

"And is that all the lesson you got?" the doctor asked.

"Wot do you mean?" said the other, sulkily, stealing a glance from under his heavy eyebrows at the Ranch King as he answered, for he had an idea what the doctor was driving at, although he pretended ignorance.

"Don't you think you have received a lesson that it doesn't pay to do wrong in this world when it is just as easy to do right?" the doctor asked, sharply.

"Wa-al, I reckon I won't make no sich bad break ag'in!" the wounded man responded.

"Anyhow, I got darned well punished for it."

"You cannot touch fire and not be burned!" Doc Brown declared. "You went into this thing with your eyes open, and you must not complain if you get salivated; but don't you think you ought to make some amends to Mr. Talbot here for your attempt to get him killed?"

"I don't own up to that!" Dan Dutton replied in a sulky way.

"Dutton, you are a stiff-necked, obstinate brute, and I reckon I will have to put the screws on you in a way you will despise!" the doctor exclaimed.

"Have you any idea what has become of your pard, that half-breed cut-throat of a cowboy?" Brown asked.

"No, how should I know? Thar don't two men a day come in to see me; I don't know anything 'bout what is going on."

"I must tell you the news, then," and the doctor detailed the particulars of the escape of the half-breed from the jail, and how Big Pete had been brought to task and his "shebang" destroyed.

"You see, there has been blazes to pay generally," the doctor said, in conclusion. "And now, if you are wise, you will make a clean breast of it, and tell how it was that you came to be mixed up with Big Pete and the half-breed. If you are obstinate and refuse to speak, hang me if I don't let you die here like a dog, for you will not deserve any better treatment."

Black Dan Dutton reflected over the situation for a few moments: as far as he could see, he had everything to gain and nothing to lose by speaking.

He would have confessed before, but his defeat rankled in his mind and he did not feel inclined to gratify the man who had conquered him.

But now the doctor had got him in a tight place, and he could not see any way to get out of it without doing as Brown desired.

"Wa-al, I ain't got nothing much to tell," he replied, "but I will spit out wot I know. It was the half-breed who put me up to the gulch job."

And then he related the particulars of his interview with Jo Cadoza in the Hotel de Sonora, when the plot to murder the Ranch King was formed.

"Why did he desire Mr. Talbot's death?" Doc Brown asked.

"Cos he was afeard that Mr. Talbot would git back at him on account of his testimony 'bout Mexican Mike's death."

"And was that the only reason he gave?" asked the doctor.

"Yes. Wot other reason could he have?" asked Black Dan Dutton, with an amazement that was evidently not assumed.

"He did not say anything about other parties in the town who were anxious to take Mr. Talbot's scalp?"

"Nary time! Why, who else is thar? Wot are you driving at, anyway?" exclaimed the wounded man in wonder.

It was plain that Black Dan Dutton knew nothing of the strangers.

After a few more words the two departed.

"Well, we didn't make anything this heat," Brown remarked as they walked back to the hotel.

"No, the pair are careful to keep in the background, but I will put spies on them at once, and if they are my enemies I will soon unmask them!" the Ranch King declared.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE HAWKS REVIVE.

FIFTEEN miles, as the crow flies, from the mining-camp of Silveropolis, in the heart of the old Cababi Mountain Range, there is as wild, and rude, and desolate a piece of country as can be found anywhere in Arizona, that land of rude, wild scenes; and high up amid this almost inaccessible mountain region was a fertile little vale, through which ran a mountain streamlet, the place a veritable oasis in the wild, sterile mountain-land.

The vale had an opening to the southeast; the smoke of the distant mining-camp, Silveropolis, could plainly be distinguished curling up against the sky; on every other side huge cliffs arose, so steep as even to bid defiance to the efforts of the sure-footed mountain-goat to scale the heights, except in one place where there was an opening.

Some great convulsion of nature had rent the

giant rock asunder and left a narrow passage-way, winding amid the peaks, which here were heavily fringed with dwarf pines and junipers.

But even the agile mountain goat could not have escaped from the vale in this direction, for at the point where the cliffs came to the vale there was a deep ravine, fully twenty feet across, just as if some mighty giant—a god-like creature—had with a ponderous battle-ax split the rocks in twain.

Across this gulf, though, the hand of man had constructed a bridge by felling three trees and placing them side by side—a rude structure, yet perfectly safe, and wide enough to allow the sure-footed prairie steeds to cross.

In the vale some rude huts had been constructed, and a group of wild-looking, brigand-like men were seated around a fire, burning merrily, in front of one of the huts.

A dinner-pot was suspended over the fire, and from the savory smell it was plain that preparations for a meal were going on.

A stranger, favored with a bird's-eye view of the group, would not have hesitated long in deciding in regard to how they gained their living.

There were a round dozen in the party, and not a man of them all upon whom the word "outlaw" was not distinctly written.

They were all armed to the teeth, knives, revolvers and rifles, but they evidently felt perfectly sure that their retreat could not be surprised by a foe, for all the rifles were leaning against the side of the nearest hut.

There was reason for their confidence.

At the opening of the valley a sentinel was placed, and this man, seated upon a rock, with his rifle resting carelessly between his knees, commanded a view of the country for miles.

The vale was so situated that there was but one road to it—and this the roughest possible trail, barely passable for horses, and that was all.

The sentinel commanded a view of this trail for a good five miles, for so sterile was this rocky land that a jack-rabbit would hardly have been able to find "cover" enough to conceal him in an approach to this vale, "shut in by Alpine hills."

The Hawks of Cababi had been revived.

This was the brigand band of Fernando Bernal.

It really seems sometimes as if Dame Fortune looked with a favorable eye upon the daring souls who lead wild lives of adventure, even though they do not live up to the code of morality; for in the group seated by the fire were some old acquaintances of the reader who has perused the story of "Dick Talbot, the Ranch King."

These men had escaped the peril of the bloody fight when Dick Talbot, with his band of cowboys, had struck the brigands and destroyed the band.

Among those who had escaped the slaughter were the two lieutenants, Durango Jo and Red Dias, the right-hand men of Bernal: these two, the readers of The Ranch King will recall, were the brains of the outlaw band.

"Is it about time for the captain to come?" Red Dias asked, with a glance at the sun now fast sinking behind the far Western peaks.

"Yes; he ought to make his appearance shortly," Durango Jo answered, "It was his calculation to return before nightfall."

"He must haste then, or the sun will beat him, for it is sinking fast."

"Something may have occurred to detain him," Durango Jo remarked.

"Yes, that is true; and he is not tied to time in regard to his coming. I hope the captain has struck something," Red Dias continued. "It is about time that we gave this region a taste of our quality."

"Yes; we owe Silveropolis and its neighborhood a grudge," Durango Jo remarked. "It was there that this accursed North American, Dick Talbot, the Ranch King, raised the force with which he destroyed our band."

And the face of the speaker grew dark with anger as he reflected upon the past.

There is an old proverb which says, 'It is a long lane which has no turning,' and you can depend upon it that Fernando Bernal will settle with the Ranch King in such a way before long as to make him regret the day when he dared to meddle with us," Red Dias observed.

"I should not be surprised if we received orders to move when the captain returns," Durango Jo declared. "It is about time we made a raid—about time that we showed the world that the Hawks of Cababi are on the wing again and their beaks and claws are as sharp as they ever were."

The two were a little apart from the rest, the most of whom were engaged in a game of cards, and so their conversation was not overheard by the others.

At this point the sentinel gave a shrill whistle.

"Aha!" exclaimed Red Dias, springing to his feet, "some one is coming."

"It is the captain, undoubtedly," Durango Jo remarked, also rising.

The two advanced to where the sentinel sat on the rock. The rest of the band took no notice of

the signal, knowing that the lieutenants would attend to the matter.

"A horseman!" the sentinel exclaimed, pointing down the valley to a mounted man who had just come in sight.

"I think it is the captain," Durango Jo remarked after taking a good look at the horseman, "but he is too far off to say for sure."

"It is almost certain that it is Bernal," Red Dias declared. "A stranger would not come on so steadily up the trail. If you notice he bends neither to the right nor left, but advances like one familiar with the road."

"We will soon see."

It was the brigand chief, Fernando Bernal, still in his half-breed, cowboy disguise, and wearing the coat and hat which he had stolen from Jack Mason, the jailer.

"Well, here I am safe and sound!" he exclaimed as he dismounted from his steed.

"But it is no fault of the cursed miners of Silveropolis that I am not dangling at the end of a rope."

"How is that, captain?" Red Dias asked.

"Why, I have had about as narrow a squeeze for my life as I ever experienced, and yet I have had some narrow slaves in my time and lived to tell of them. Wait till I get rid of my disguise and then I will give you the story."

He called one of the brigands to take his horse to the corral, which was at the upper end of the little vale, and then entered the first one of the cabins, which was sacred to the brigand chief; the lieutenants followed.

Bernal stripped off the rough clothes and arrayed himself in a neat Mexican suit, such as is worn by the ranchers of that nation.

Then he removed the rough, coarse-haired wig which covered his own short, black locks, applied a razor to his face and shaved off the beard; after this, with a sponge, wet with alcohol, he removed the dye which had given the copper tinge to his skin.

The transformation was marvelous, and no one seeing the brigand in his neat rancher's dress could possibly have believed he had been the rough-looking half-breed, unless they were sure of the fact.

"There now, I feel something like myself," he remarked after the transformation was completed. "And now I will give you a history of my adventures."

And this he did, much to the amazement of the others.

"So you see," he said in conclusion, "that this Ranch King is in one respect like myself, he has the devil's own luck. I laid two as skillfully-devised traps for him as the mind of man ever conceived, and yet he escaped from both of them with very little trouble, and in the last attempt to compass his death, I experienced the fate of the engineer who was hoist by his own petard, and if it had not been for these two strangers, who helped me to escape from Guaymas jail, my neck and a hempen noose would have become intimately acquainted."

"A miss is as good as a mile, captain," Red Dias remarked.

"A truer sentence was never spoken!" the brigand chief declared.

"What is the programme now?" Durango Jo asked.

"I am going to Silveropolis in my own proper person. I am a rancher this time from the south who has sold out his place in Mexico and thinks of getting one near Silveropolis."

"Isn't it rather risky?" Red Dias asked.

"I think not; few in Arizona have ever seen me without a disguise, and the odds are a million to one that no one will recognize in the Mexican rancher the unlucky devil of a half-breed who came so near to a rope."

"That is so!" Durango Jo assented.

"Oh, yes, your disguise was perfect," Red Dias remarked.

"I want you two to come with me this time; get yourself up as miners looking for work, but also possessed of a deal of sporting blood. I've got some plan in my head, and, as soon as I can arrange details, I will try my luck again with this Ranch King."

Put Yellow Jim in command of the men here, with instructions to advance to the junction of our trail with the north road, so as to get there three hours after he sees the smoke signal, which commands him to move."

"I will attend to it," Red Dias replied.

"And now let's have something to eat, for I am almost starved!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

UNEXPECTED VISITORS.

MORTON and Bledstone sat in their room in the Silver Ship. It was two nights after the one on which the half-breed had succeeded in effecting his escape from the calaboose.

A candle was burning on the table; the pair had just come from supper, and now they were puffing away at their cigars, but in anything but a contented state of mind.

"Old man, things don't work the way they ought to," Morton remarked.

"That is a fact," Bledstone admitted.

"And yet men say that there is no such thing as luck in this world."

"Bah!" exclaimed the other, in supreme contempt. "The men who say that don't know what they are talking about. This world is all luck!"

"Yes, and this Talbot, the Ranch King, is the luckiest man I ever ran across in all my experience."

"That is true."

"If he had been any ordinary man, with an ordinary run of luck, some one of the many blows that we have struck at him would surely have sealed his doom."

"That is true enough, but as it is, he has come up smiling, every time!" Bledstone exclaimed.

"I am disgusted, of course, with our ill-luck, but I do not despair," Morton remarked. "In one particular, we have been lucky, and that is in succeeding in keeping in the background all the time. It was evident that suspicion was roused in regard to our having something to do with the escape of the half-breed, but we managed the affair so cleverly that we came off with flying colors."

"Yes, and speaking of lucky men, this Fernando Bernal was not behind the door when luck was given out!" Bledstone exclaimed.

"Yes, that's so; he has no reason to complain."

"He had a mighty narrow escape! I don't think I would be willing to risk my neck so near a halter for all the money there is in the mountains of Arizona."

"It is not money that urges him on," Morton observed. "It is the desire to be avenged upon the Ranch King."

"Yes, I understand that; but do you think we shall see anything more of him? Will not this last narrow escape be apt to take some of the dare-devil out of him?"

"I think not; the craving for revenge has become a passion, and only death will be apt to cure him of his desire."

There was a knock at the door.

"Come in!" said Morton.

The door opened and Fernando Bernal appeared, but his appearance was so changed that neither one of the men recognized him.

"I beg your pardon, gentlemen, for intruding, but I would like the pleasure of a few minutes' conversation with you, if you will grant me the privilege. My name is Juan Torrejon. I am a rancher from Sonora—have lately disposed of my place there, and am now in search of a new location."

"We are at your service, sir; pray be seated," Morton replied.

Bernal helped himself to a chair.

He was delighted at the completeness of his disguise and made up his mind to have a little fun at the expense of his hosts.

"I wanted to speak to you upon an important matter. I am informed that you bear a deadly hatred to this Ranch King."

The pair were thunderstruck, and they stared for a moment in speechless amazement at the man.

Morton was the first to recover the use of his tongue.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir; there is some mistake—it is not so! We hardly know the gentleman!" he declared.

"Is the report also false, then, that you are in league with this brigand, Fernando Bernal?" the other asked, coolly.

Again the pair stared, and then suddenly a light broke in upon them. There was but one man who could possess knowledge enough to address such questions to them, and that was the brigand himself.

"Oho! it is quite a joke, isn't it?" Morton exclaimed. "But I tell you what it is, your disguise is so perfect that for a moment your words sent a cold chill all over me."

"Yes, you gave me quite a start," Bledstone added.

The brigand laughed.

"You did not recognize me?"

"No, indeed!" Morton answered.

"There is not much danger, then, that any one else will," Bernal remarked.

"None at all!" Morton declared.

"We are well-acquainted with you, and if you could deceive us it is not likely any one else will recognize you."

"No trace of the half-breed cowboy now, eh?"

"Not a bit," Morton replied.

"No, nor of the pale-faced, haggard man who lay in chains in Guaymas Jail," Bledstone observed.

"Ah! I thank you for bringing back to my mind the remembrance of those hours of torture!" the brigand exclaimed, his brow dark and his eyes flashing angry fires. "It will serve to whet my appetite for revenge upon this accursed Ranch King, to whom I am indebted for those dark and gloomy hours."

"You are not disposed to give up because you have failed?" Morton inquired.

"Am I not on the ground now, more eager to kill this Dick Talbot than ever?"

"Have you any scheme in your head?" Bledstone inquired.

"Yes, but it is not yet developed enough to explain; patience! soon I will be ready to strike a blow. I came to let you see that I am ready

to go on. You must make my acquaintance in the saloon, so we can confer together without exciting remark. When I am ready I will let you know."

And then the brigand departed.

"He will do the trick after all!" Bledstone exclaimed.

"I think so!"

The two conspirators felt better now, and as they were discussing this unexpected occurrence there came a knock at the door, and when Morton bade the knocker enter, through the portal came Dick Talbot, followed by the Indian, Mud Turtle.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

TALBOT SPEAKS TO THE POINT.

THE two were amazed at the appearance of the Ranch King, and from the way that he and his red satellite marched into the room, they jumped to the conclusion that danger threatened them, although they were unable to guess in what shape it would come.

Like able masters of the art of dissimulation, they concealed their fears and received the unexpected visitors in the most cordial manner.

"Why, my dear Mr. Talbot!" exclaimed Morton, springing to his feet as soon as he discovered that it was the Ranch King. "I am delighted to see you! Pray take a chair."

Bledstone also rose, and while Morton brought a chair for Talbot, he did the same for the Indian.

"Will you have a cigar?" inquired Morton, taking out his cigar-case, after they were all seated.

"No, thank you, Mr. Morton—Morton is your name, I believe?" said Talbot, in the quiet way which rendered it an impossibility for any one to guess his purpose.

"Yes, sir, Morton is my name—Jonathan Morton."

"And this gentleman?" Talbot looked at Bledstone.

"Bledstone—William Bledstone," he hastened to say.

"Ah, Morton and Bledstone," Talbot repeated, in a thoughtful way. "Those are not the names I expected to hear."

Despite their strong powers of self-control, a trace of nervousness was apparent in the manner of both the men.

"Excuse me, I do not think I exactly understand," Morton remarked, in his smoothest way.

"Well, I had an idea that I had met you two gentlemen before, but you did not call yourselves then by the names which you have just given me," the Ranch King remarked, with slow deliberation.

The pair felt that they were in a ticklish position, but they saw no other course open than to assume a bold front.

"You are laboring under some mistake, I am sure, Mr. Talbot," Morton replied. "I am certain we have never met before, for a man like yourself, Mr. Talbot, once seen, is not apt to be easily forgotten."

Talbot inclined his head slightly, but the cold expression upon his face did not soften.

"I am sure I should keep such a face as yours in my memory for years!" Bledstone declared.

"You are quite certain, then, that we have never met before?" the Ranch King asked.

"Oh, yes, decidedly sure!" Morton cried.

"I am quite positive!" Bledstone asserted.

"It is very odd, then," Talbot remarked, in a thoughtful way.

"Excuse me, but what is odd?"

Morton was impelled to ask the question, although he had a suspicion that the answer would be a disagreeable one.

"Well, I think that it is odd that if you two gentlemen are utter strangers to me, as you declare, you should go out of your way to attack me as if I was the bitterest enemy you had."

"Attack you?" cried both the men in a breath, and they paled visibly as they uttered the exclamation.

"Yes, attack me! That is what I said," the Ranch King replied with cool deliberation.

"But what put such an idea into your head?" Morton cried. "Why should we attack you?"

"Now you have put just the question which I would like to have answered," Talbot rejoined. "Why, indeed, should you two attack a man who never to his knowledge, either wronged or interfered with you in any way?"

"You never did, Mr. Talbot!" Morton cried.

"Certainly not!" Bledstone added.

"Men attack their enemies, of course, attack men who have excited their hate in some way, but never in the course of my experience did I know of men seeking to kill another who was an utter stranger to them, and could not possibly have injured them in any way."

"The idea is absurd! No one but a maniac would act in that way!" Morton declared.

"Neither one of you appear to be insane!" the Ranch King remarked, "and yet I am satisfied you have attempted my life."

The pair were visibly troubled; this was no proof of guilt though, for innocent men would surely be disturbed by such a charge.

"What makes you think so?" Morton exclaimed. "I am at a loss to understand!"

"Because you, I think, were the men who egged this half-breed on to attack me."

This direct accusation for a moment almost took the breath of the two away, for it was entirely unexpected.

"Mr. Talbot, I am sure you have no proof of this!" Morton exclaimed, trying to assume an air of injured innocence.

"No, it is surmise, I own, but that you aided the half-breed to escape I am certain."

"Oh, no, Mr. Talbot, you cannot be certain!" Morton protested, and he believed this to be the truth.

"You supplied the half-breed with the opium, or morphine, with which he drugged the whisky which put the jailers to sleep."

"I am not a doctor to carry drugs around with me!" the other declared.

"No, but you are an opium eater and so are accustomed to have the drug with you."

This was a home thrust, and Morton winced in spite of his firm nerves.

"Oh, no, Mr. Talbot, you are wrong!" Morton protested. "Some enemy of mine must have poisoned your mind against me!"

"And one of you two was the man who stole the horse from the hotel corral and tied it so that the half-breed could have it to aid him to escape."

The men were profoundly puzzled. How had it been possible for the Ranch King to become so well-informed in regard to the facts in the case?

The only conclusion that they could reach was that he really knew nothing; he was only shrewdly guessing at the truth, and a stout denial must be made.

"Mr. Talbot, as I said before, you cannot prove these accusations by evidence that would be satisfactory to a jury of honest men!" Morton declaimed with a fine affectation of the indignation of innocence. "It is not true that we aided the half-breed in any way! Why should we? He was a stranger to us. Why should we attack you, a stranger also?"

"As I said before, that is just what I want to find out," the Ranch King replied. "Only a year or two ago a similar occurrence to this business happened."

"An attempt was made to assassinate me one day as I was riding homeward. By a bare chance I escaped. I shot one of the pair who ambushed me and had the other at my mercy, but he pleaded that it was a mistake. They thought I was another man with whom they had quarreled. I believed the tale, for I could not conceive that two strangers could want to murder me without a reason."

"But I was tricked; the man I spared and his companion, whom I thought I had killed, but had in reality only stunned, my bullet going along his skull instead of into it, hired a Mexican bravo to assassinate me, but the scheme failed and I trapped the man; in order to save his life he confessed everything."

"He had been hired by these two men to kill me. Then, as soon as I could, I came to Silveropolis to call them to an account; though I searched diligently for the pair I was not able to find them. They had vanished, but as I could describe them I found no difficulty in discovering who they were."

"The man whom I supposed I had killed was an Englishman by birth, but he seemed so like an American that few would have suspected he was not native to the soil; he called himself Ben England; that was not his real name, of course, for that it was assumed is evident. He was an adventurer; a man who had evidently come of a good family, but plainly a black sheep, one who had probably been obliged to fly from his native land; the other was a gambler known as Curly Kid."

"Now, gentlemen, although you have managed to so completely change your personal appearance that I have not been able to recognize you, yet it is my belief that you are those two men who once sought my life, and now are again attempting it."

"I assure you, Mr. Talbot, you are in error!" Morton declared, making a desperate effort to appear calm, although the cold hand of fear was pulling at his heart-strings.

"You are not this Ben England, then?"

"No, sir; I am an American."

"And you are not this gambler, Curly Kid?" the Ranch King asked, turning to the other.

He was equally as prompt and emphatic in his denial as his companion.

Although the pair were terror-stricken at the disclosure of Dick Talbot's suspicions, for his guesses had hit the truth, yet they felt certain that there was no way by means of which he could prove that they were sailing under false colors.

That appeared to them to be an utter impossibility, and so they were prompt and strong in affirming that he was mistaken.

"Yet, in spite of what you say, gentlemen, I am sure I am right about this matter," the Ranch King declared.

"My dear sir, although I know that it will not be an easy matter for us to prove that we are the persons we pretend to be, as we are

strangers in this section, yet I am sure it will be impossible for you to bring forward any testimony to show that we are the men you take us to be."

"Oh, yes, I can prove that you are Ben England!" Dick Talbot replied. "Prove it to the satisfaction of the whole town!"

The confident announcement amazed the conspirators.

"Upon my word, Mr. Talbot, I am sure that before you got through you would come to the conclusion that you had undertaken an extremely difficult task!" Morton declared.

"Oh, no, not difficult at all. I should merely say, 'I know this man is the Ben England whom I shot, when he attempted to assassinate me, and left for dead upon the prairie, because you will find upon his head the scar left by my bullet.'"

The breath of Morton came thick and hard; he saw he was entrapped.

Bledstone turned pale, and there was a slight movement of his hand, as though he meditated the drawing of a weapon, but gladly as he would have brought on a fight, if he thought he could get "the drop" upon the intruders, quickly he came to the conclusion that they were prepared for war.

Talbot had his right hand in the pocket of his loose sack-coat, and Bledstone suspected that it grasped a pistol, probably with hammer raised, ready for action.

The Indian was all wrapped up in a blanket, after the fashion of the red-men; both of his hands were concealed in the folds, and as the gambler meditated a resort to arms, he caught the cold gleam of the savage's dark eyes, glittering snake-like, and immediately understood that the red-skin was fully prepared for war, and would have his revolver out long before he could hope to get his tool ready for action.

There was a dead silence for a few minutes, then the Ranch King spoke:

"If you are not the man you bear no scar! Do you dare to let me see your head?"

"I—this is a most extraordinary coincidence!" Morton stammered at last.

"An, you have a scar then, but you are not the man?" Dick Talbot observed, in an extremely sarcastic manner.

"Yes, it is so; an accident when I was but a mere boy," the other exclaimed, nervously.

"It is unfortunate for you that it is so, for it satisfies me that you are the man I took you to be," the Ranch King remarked, with all the calm serenity of a judge passing sentence upon a condemned criminal. "And now for the warning which I came to give."

"I don't know why you have attacked me, but I am going to put a stop to it. I have brought you to book, and in the future I am going to hold you two responsible. The first time that I am attacked, I shall take it for granted that it is your work, and I shall seek out and kill both of you on sight!"

"Mark! there will be no more warning, so take heed how you plot against me! That is all I have to say!"

And then the Ranch King and the Indian departed, leaving consternation behind them.

CHAPTER XXXIX. IN COUNCIL.

THERE was a long period of silence after the unwelcome visitors departed.

Bledstone, or Curly Kid, to give the gambler his right name—the one by which he was known when we first introduced him to our readers in the tale of "Talbot, the Ranch King," and by which we shall hereafter call him—was the first to speak.

"Well, all the fat is in the fire now, for sure!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, there is no doubt of it. He has penetrated our disguise, and it will no longer serve us."

"He hasn't got at the reason of your attacks, though?"

"No, and you can see that it puzzles him greatly, and it is no wonder. The name of Ben England gives him no clue, no information; but if he knew that I am rightly called Reginald Carford Broughton, then he might have a suspicion in regard to why I desire to take his life. He would understand that I am a near relative of his wife, the Frisco Nell of other days, and he would guess that my attempts to have him killed had something to do with the vast estates in England which were once her father's."

"Oh, yes, he would be able to see the mouse in the meal-tub then."

"He would be blind indeed if he did not suspect the interest which I have in his life or death."

"But I say, old fellow, there are some things in this affair of yours which puzzle me."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; it seems to me that you are taking a great deal of trouble, and running a terrible risk, for a small stake," the gambler observed.

"If I remember rightly, when you first proposed to me to go into this affair with you, your statement was that, if you could succeed in killing the Ranch King and marrying his widow, you would come in for a thousand pounds, which is five thousand dollars, Ameri-

can money, on your wedding day, and your wife would receive an annual income of five thousand pounds—twenty-five thousand dollars."

"Yes, that is what I said."

"That is a nice sum of money; the five thousand dollars is not to be sneezed at, and if your wife got twenty-five thousand a year, no doubt you would be able to get some pretty pickings out of it."

"Certainly!"

"But in order to enjoy these moneys, first, you had to kill the Ranch King, or separate him from his wife in some way, so that she would be free to marry again; second, you had to woo and win the widow."

"Correctly stated."

"The Ranch King is but mortal, therefore he could be killed; but that you could succeed in winning the love of the widow, so that she would be willing to become your wife, seems to me to be an experiment that a wise man would not feel like banking much money on."

Broughton laughed.

"You are right there," he replied; "apparently I am running a big risk for little gains. But, if things were as you put them, a desperate man, to whom it was the last chance to make a stake, might be justified in going into it."

"Yes, but not otherwise."

"Well, I am about to the end of my rope, and if I don't land a stake out of this affair, I shall be pretty badly off," Broughton admitted.

"But I have not told you everything."

"Oh, well, of course, I don't want to pry into your affairs. You have lived up to your agreement with me, and I have no right to complain."

"We have got to make a desperate effort now, or give up the game," the other remarked, thoughtfully, "and I don't mind letting you in to the secret."

"This Mrs. Talbot is the heiress of a hundred thousand pounds!"

"Five hundred thousand dollars!" exclaimed the other in amazement. "By Jove! that is a pretty plum!"

"Yes, the sum was left to her by will; it was all of her father's estate that he was able to dispose of in that way; you know our English laws keep landed property to the male line."

"The man who succeeded to the estate was a rascal; he got possession of the will; the lawyer who drew it was dead, and he suppressed it, but did not destroy the paper."

"I have heard of such cases."

"Now he is sickly, has not long to live and his conscience troubles him. When he dies he wants the will to be found, and then Mrs. Talbot will come in for the money. But this man, and myself, are the only two persons in the world that know, and can prove, that Mrs. Talbot is the heir."

"So you see, if the Ranch King is out of the way, even if I am not able to woo and win the widow, I can, undoubtedly, make a good bargain with her in regard to this money."

"Yes, yes, I see!"

"Of course, there is a chance that I can win her if I play my cards carefully."

"Oh, yes, there is a chance," the gambler admitted.

"You see I am playing for a big stake and am justified in taking a big risk."

"That is true; and the risk is big now too, you may be sure of that!" Curly Kid declared. "The Ranch King meant business when he said that if he had any more trouble he should take the war-path against us."

"Oh, yes, he was in earnest, and I have no doubt he will live up to his word."

"We must keep our eyes peeled then!" the gambler declared.

"If we do not we shall be apt to suffer."

"Oh, yes, certain!"

"Just as soon as Bernal gets his plans arranged he will make another attack on the Ranch King."

"And if he fails?" Curly Kid questioned.

"Well, we must look out for ourselves."

"If we do not, it is ten to one that this Ranch King will put us in a condition for planting!" the gambler declared. "I don't admire funerals, anyway, and I have the strongest possible objections to riding in the first carriage for a while, for I am not tired of life."

"I agree with you there. I am terribly anxious to land this big stake, but if it is going to cost me my life, the gain will not be worth the risk."

"You are right for a thousand ducats!" Curly Kid declared. "We must see Bernal and report to him the particulars of this interview."

"Yes, that is a good idea, for he ought to know what has occurred."

"Then, when he gets ready to strike his blow he can give us timely warning."

"Exactly! so we will be able to make ourselves scarce in case it fails," Curly Kid suggested.

"We had best seek him at once."

"The sooner the better!"

Fortune favored the plotters, for as they went into the entry they met Bernal, who was

just leaving his room, which was on the same floor.

Broughton informed the brigand that he had important intelligence to communicate, and the three returned to the apartment, making sure that there was no spy near to note them.

Then Broughton communicated to the brigand the particulars of the interview with the Ranch King.

Bernal's brow darkened as he listened.

"Aha! he thinks it is about time that he struck a few blows!" he exclaimed. "He is getting tired of these attacks in the dark, and is anxious to meet his foe in the open field. Well, I do not blame him. I do not like myself to be perpetually on guard against a secret enemy. It is the hidden, unknown danger that daunts the soul of man."

"Will this matter interfere with your plans?" Broughton inquired.

"Oh, no, not at all!" the brigand replied. "I was not counting on your aid. I am glad, though, that you took care to promptly inform me in regard to it, for now I shall know how to conduct myself."

"It was my intention, you know, to apparently make the acquaintance of you two in the saloon, so we could converse together without exciting suspicion, but that will have to be given up now, for the Ranch King will be sure to have his spies about, and if we were seen to exchange words it would direct suspicion to me; so we must be careful when we meet not to take any notice of each other."

The others agreed that this was a wise precaution.

Then an idea occurred to Bernal.

"How would it answer for you two to leave the town?" he asked. "Go away, you know, just as if you were disgusted with the game and were satisfied that it would be best to give it up."

The pair thought over the matter for a few moments, and then expressed the opinion that it would be a good move.

"Do you see how it will be apt to work?" the crafty brigand asked. "The Ranch King will be sure to jump to the conclusion that his threats have frightened you away. He will say, 'So! now that they know I am up to their game, they have come to the decision to give it up. I have scared them out of the town!'"

"Yes, he will be certain to come to that conclusion!" Broughton exclaimed.

"If he does not, then he must possess the wisdom of the serpent!" Curly Kid added.

"The move will be almost sure to throw him off his guard, and then I can take him un-awares."

"Let me see? Where had we better go?" Broughton remarked. "We must not go too far away, for I should like to be in at the death, when the Ranch King is hunted down."

"Be my guests for a while," the brigand said. "I have a truly romantic retreat up in the mountains, and if my plans succeed I will have the Ranch King up there, helpless in my power, before he is a week older."

"That is a good idea; we will go there!" the Englishman declared.

"Pay your bill, take your horses and announce that you are going to Cababiville on mining business," said Bernal. "On the road a herdsman will meet you. He will tell you that it is a fine night, and ask you if you do not want to hire a good man. You engage him and he will conduct you to my mountain home."

"All right. How soon shall we set out?"

"In half an hour."

This ended the conversation, and thirty minutes later the conspirators rode out of Silveropolis.

The night was bright enough to enable them to see their way, but not to discover that a spy was on their trail, tracking them as the dusky Indian warrior does his intended prey.

CHAPTER XL.

SNARED AT LAST.

FROM trifles, light as air, sometimes spring consequences which involve the fate of nations.

It was the Ranch King's intention to set out for home about nine o'clock on this evening, during which his speech had carried such dismay to the hearts of the conspirators, but when the time came and he looked for the Indian, Mud Turtle was not to be found.

He wondered at the circumstance, for he had told the red-skin he did not intend to remain in Silveropolis after nine, and, as a rule, Mud Turtle was as punctual as the sun.

Thinking he would soon appear, Dick Talbot returned to the Silver Ship, and while waiting there in the saloon the landlord made up a card-party and pressed him to take a hand.

With the idea of passing away the time until the Indian should come the Ranch King consented.

The game proved to be an interesting one, and as Mud Turtle did not arrive to call the Ranch King away he stayed with the party until it broke up, which was not until after midnight.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Talbot, as he consulted his watch. "I had no idea it was so late."

"Blame my sorry topmasts! if we ain't made a night on it!" Skipper Bill declared.

"I wonder what on earth has become of my Indian!" the Ranch King said. "I told him to put in an appearance about nine, as I intended to make an early start for home."

"I reckon he must have been sampling some of the bug-juice around town, and it has proved too much for him," Plunkett suggested, the mayor being one of the card-party.

"I have known the Indian a good many years, and I cannot recall the time when he could not take care of all the fire-water he could get on board."

"Our bug-juice here beats the world!" the mayor declared, "particularly the stuff which our worthy host sets out. It has laid out many a man."

"Belay, there! take a reef in your jawing-tackle and come to anchor!" Skipper Bill exclaimed. "Good judges of licker admit that I keep the best rum to be found in Arizona, bar none!"

"You don't dare to ask us to have a drink so we can try it!" the mayor declared, with a wink at the rest.

"Ah, you lubber! I knew that was what you were fishing for!" Skipper Bill replied. "But I am not the man to take a dare from any son of a sea-cook in this hyer district, so brace yer royals and heave up alongside! Give it a name, my hearties! Wot'll you have for yer nightcaps?"

And the landlord went behind the bar to do the honors.

The liquids were called for and dispatched; then the mayor insisted on "another one with me!" and after this a miner stood treat, so it was nearly one o'clock before the Ranch King left the saloon.

But although all was quiet in the street when he got out, as everything was closed with the exception of the hotel bar, yet no thought of danger came to him.

He was puzzled by the absence of the Indian, for he knew Mud Turtle too well to suppose that he had got drunk, and was sleeping off the effects of the liquor in some quiet corner, as had been suggested.

"It is quite probable that he has struck some trail which he thinks is worth following up," the Ranch King remarked, communing with himself as he proceeded to the corral. "It may be that he has got on the track of the half-breed, although it does not seem possible, after the narrow escape the fellow had, that he would dare to come near the town for some time."

"I fancy I have put a spoke in the wheels of these two plotters," he continued. "If they keep on with their designs against me, they are more plucky than I take them to be. Thanks to Doc Brown, I was able to give them what must have been anything but an agreeable surprise, and it was so entirely unexpected, too."

Then Dick Talbot indulged in a quiet laugh as he reflected upon the startling effect which his words had produced in the bearing of the "speculators."

The night was not a light one, although there was a moon, but it was a waning one, and partially obscured by clouds.

Being well acquainted with the corral, however, he knew he would not have any difficulty in getting his horse, no matter how dark it was.

Of course, at such an hour, he would have to attend to the getting out of the beast himself, for the hostler was in bed long ago.

All was still, with the exception of the stamping of some restless horses upon the hard ground, and the shed was pretty dark where his beast was tied.

He stepped within it, totally unsuspecting of danger, but had not advanced more than a yard when he received a blow upon the head, almost heavy enough to fell an ox.

He staggered back, threw up his arms—an involuntary motion, for he was stunned by the shock, so knew not what he did—and then sunk to the earth.

At last bold Injun Dick had fallen into a snare.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE BRIGAND'S VENGEANCE.

WHEN the Ranch King recovered his senses, he found himself in the open air; his wrists and ankles were bound with stout lariats and he was tied on the back of a horse in such a way that he could not fall off, face downward, and the animal, guided by a horseman who rode at his head, was taking him up into the mountains, through as rude and sterile a tract of country as he had ever seen.

Two more horsemen rode in the advance.

The Ranch King had a violent headache when his senses returned to him, and it was some moments before his mental machinery worked smoothly.

He had received a blow that would have been sure to have cracked his skull had it not been unusually thick; as it was, though, as soon as he recovered sufficiently so as to be able to

realize his condition, he felt he was not materially damaged.

It did not take him long after he recovered his senses to come to a conclusion in regard to what had happened.

He was in the hands of his enemies, and the half-breed cowboy, undoubtedly, was at the bottom of the matter, for he could see that the man who led the horse, upon whose back he was bound, was dressed like a Mexican herdsman.

But who was back of the half-breed? It seemed certain that he, single-handed, could not have carried out so bold a scheme.

Had the two men whom he had warned dared to plan and commit so bold an assault?

It did not seem possible.

And where was he being carried?

Up into the mountains, amid the wild peaks of the old Cababi Range.

Then into the Ranch King's mind came thoughts of Fernando Bernal and his brigand band.

This was like a piece of brigand work.

Had Bernal escaped the death to which he, the Ranch King, had condemned him when he gave the captive brigand chief into the hands of the Mexican authorities, and was this the vengeance he was taking for having been thus treated?

The path grew wilder and steeper; up, up they went, along a narrow, winding trail, so rude and rough that even the sure-footed prairie steeds, the unshod horses of the Western wilds, had all they could do to keep their feet.

At last they came to a little vale, the entrance to which was guarded by a sentinel who sat on a rock, rifle in hand.

And when the Ranch King saw this man, he understood that the vague suspicion which had entered his mind was true; he was in the hands of a brigand band, and then to his remembrance came the thought that he had uttered to the doctor.

From the marvelous skill the half-breed cowboy had displayed in effecting his escape, it seemed possible that he might be the brigand captain, Fernando Bernal, in person.

The horse which bore the captive was halted in front of the larger one of two huts which were in the middle of the vale.

The Ranch King was released from the lashings which bound him to the steed, and then was carried into the hut; the lariats around his ankles and wrists were not disturbed, and he was placed upon a buffalo-robe in a corner.

After this was done orders in regard to his safe-keeping were given.

As near as he could make out there were six or eight men asleep in the hut; four of them were roused and placed on guard, two within the hut and two without.

No word was said to the prisoner.

Soon the quiet of the wilderness reigned again, only broken by the tramping of the sentinels.

Like the majority of men who have led a life of adventure, Dick Talbot was able to sleep under circumstances which would have effectually banished slumber from the eyes of ordinary men, and so, realizing that until morning came he would not be able to learn what was to be his fate, he closed his eyes and in half an hour slept as sleeps the man whose mind is not troubled with the weight of carking care.

Bright and early in the morning the men who slept in the hut with the prisoner were aroused by the sentinels, and one by one they departed, casting many a curious glance at the bound man, who made no attempt to enter into conversation with them, but took matters as calmly as though this extraordinary experience was an every-day affair.

That the men were members of a brigand band was plain, for their appearance betrayed that they were outlawed outcasts.

After the Ranch King was left to meditate in solitude he could hear the men without building a fire, evidently preparing breakfast, and soon the savory smell of cooking meat rose on the air.

It was about an hour from the time the camp was roused before anyone came near Talbot, then two savage-looking fellows entered the hut.

The Ranch King recognized one of them as being the man who had ridden next to him on the journey.

They removed the lariat from Talbot's ankles and bade him rise, but the limbs of the Ranch King were so cramped that it was some minutes before he was able to use his legs.

As soon as he could walk the two conducted him out of the hut.

A strange, picturesque scene met his eyes.

Before the door of the hut where he had been confined blazed a huge fire; the morning was rather chilly, and the brigands had built a fire large enough to roast an ox, using huge pieces of a dead tree which they had cut down, and it was apparent that their occupancy of the vale was to be more than a temporary one, for by the side of the hut was a huge pile of small pine trees, which they had cut down and thrown into a heap to season. The pile was almost as big as the hut.

The most of the outlaws were in a group by the fire, and a few paces from them stood the

two men whom the Ranch King had brought to book on the previous evening, Broughton and the gambler, Curly Kid.

With them was a good-looking Mexican, dressed like a rancher of that nation, with a dashing, military air, and the Ranch King immediately jumped to the conclusion that this was the brigand chief, Fernando Bernal.

The eyes of the three sparkled with triumph as they looked upon their captive.

"Aha, Señor Dick Talbot, Ranch King of Arivaca, I bid you welcome to my mountain home!" the brigand chief exclaimed.

"Thank you," Dick Talbot replied, with perfect coolness. "If you had not taken me so by surprise, it is possible I would appreciate your welcome more than I do at present."

The brigand chief burst into a loud laugh.

"Now, by all the saints, I swear you are a cool hand, and it is a pity that things are as they are!"

"Have you any idea who I am?"

"Yes, I think I recognize you, though I would not, probably, except for the peculiar circumstances attending this meeting. You are Fernando Bernal, the brigand chief."

"Yes, you are right, I am Fernando Bernal, the man whom you delivered to the Mexican authorities, and who would have been shot to death by them at Guaymas, after laying for many weary months in prison, loaded with chains, had I not been able to effect my escape."

"I reckon I will have to plead guilty to that," the Ranch King remarked. "It is a true bill."

"You, to-night, have experienced a little of the misery which I suffered in Guaymas jail," the brigand chief remarked. "But with the difference that the minutes in your case were days in mine."

"Oh, I don't think it needs a personal experience to satisfy a man that to lay in a dark and dreary dungeon, loaded with chains, is neither agreeable nor conducive to health."

The brigands looked at each other; they had seen some cool men in their time, but never one to equal the prisoner.

"And can you guess how I spent the greater part of my time in that dark, damp cell?" demanded Bernal, a fierce light shining in his eyes.

"Raking your mind to find some means to escape from the fate to which you were doomed, I should suppose," the Ranch King answered. "I knew that would be what I would be apt to do under like circumstances."

"No, you are wrong; I was so securely guarded—the chance of escape was so small, that I did not think it was possible I could in that way avoid my doom."

"I reckon I get at what you mean; you whiled the time away by thoughts of vengeance," Dick Talbot remarked, speaking as indifferently, as though he took no interest in the matter.

"Yes, you are right! I dreamed of vengeance upon the man who had brought me to such a fate!" the brigand cried, his eyes darting lurid fires, and his hands clinched as though he was about, tiger-like, to spring upon the prisoner.

"Yes, but it seems to me that it was not a very rational proceeding," the Ranch King remarked, reflectively. "Now you say that you had no hope of escaping; if you could not get out of the jail, you could not hope to secure vengeance. If I had been in your place, I would not have bothered my head with thoughts of vengeance, but should have bent all my brains to devise some way to escape, and then, after that was accomplished, there would be time enough to plan for satisfaction."

"I begin to think that you do not understand the nature of the trap into which you have fallen!" cried the brigand chief, astonished at the coolness of the prisoner.

"Oh, yes, I reckon I understand it well enough," and the Ranch King made a grimace as he looked around upon the outlaws.

"You comprehend that you are here, utterly at my mercy?"

"Yes."

"The mercy of the man that you gave to death?"

"Yes, and do you know, Bernal, that is one act of my life that I have felt a little bit sorry for," the Ranch King remarked, his brows wrinkled with thought. "I have wrestled with the matter considerably, and my conscience has been a little troubled about giving you up to the Mexicans, who were never brave or skillful enough to capture you."

"By the way!" cried Dick Talbot, abruptly, as though the idea had just come to him, "I am not saying this, you know, with the idea of currying favor with you, because I am not fool enough to imagine that anything I may say will have sufficient influence to turn you from any purpose you may have formed in regard to me."

"I am telling you this to please myself—to relieve my mind, for the matter has bothered me a little."

"I regret that I turned you over to the Mexicans—not but what you richly deserved to be punished for your crimes, but as they did not have any hand in your capture, they ought not to have had you."

"Then, when I think the matter over, I say to myself, 'What could I have done with the man? Let him go free? That would not do, for he had been as a scourge to Arizona, and I have come to the conclusion that I ought to have given you up to the authorities of the nearest Arizonian district upon whose inhabitants you had preyed.'"

"In that case I would undoubtedly have been hung up to the nearest tree without being afforded the luxury of a trial!" the brigand exclaimed.

"I reckon you are right. I don't think they would have stood on much ceremony with you; so, after all, as far as you are concerned, it was a good thing for you that I yielded to the request of the Mexican authorities and gave you up to them."

"You can thank these gentlemen for my escape from Guaymas jail," Bernal remarked, nodding to Broughton and the gambler.

"Well, I did not suspect that, although I felt certain that they aided you to escape from the calaboose in Silveropolis, for you were the half-breed cowboy, I suppose?"

"Yes, and in endeavoring to strike you a blow I pretty nearly lost my own life."

"It was a narrow squeeze," Talbot said.

"Now I begin to see into this thing," he continued. "These men helped you to escape from the jail at Guaymas in order that you might attack me; by freeing you they secured a bravo."

"You have hit upon the truth, Talbot," Broughton remarked. "I don't mind admitting it now that the knowledge comes too late to be of any benefit to you."

"The riddle is out now, yet there is one thing that I do not understand: why have you two attacked me? There has never been any trouble between us, because I am sure I never saw either one of you before the day when you laid in wait for me on the prairie."

"You are right; that was our first meeting," Broughton replied. "And now, seeing that you are in a trap from which, with life, it will be impossible for you to escape, I don't mind giving you a hint which may enable you to see into this mystery."

"I am an Englishman, as you suspected, but though in this country I have always been called Ben England, my right name is Reginald Carford Broughton."

"Ah, I see! a light breaks in upon me!" the Ranch King exclaimed. "You are a relative of my wife, and you are named after her father."

"Exactly!"

"There is some money in the question, and your calculation has been that if I was out of the way you would be able, through my wife, to get hold of some of it."

"Your guess is correct. Your death will leave your wife unprotected and I, as one of her nearest relatives, will take great pleasure in looking after her interests, expecting, of course, to be well paid for my trouble."

The Ranch King burst into a loud laugh, much to the surprise of all.

"You are an idiot!" he exclaimed. "This little scheme of yours will not work, and you will find that you have had your trouble for nothing. You don't know Mrs. Talbot."

"When you are out of the way I will win my game, all right," Broughton declared.

"Talbot, you are a good man—a better one than I expected!" Fernando Bernal exclaimed, "and I am sorry that I am obliged to kill you, but I have sworn it, and I am a slave to my word!"

"If you have any delicate scruples about killing a man who is helpless in your power, and feel inclined to give me a chance for my life, I will tell you what I will do. Give me a revolver, turn me loose and I will fight all of you! Then you will have the satisfaction of killing me like a gentleman and not like a cowardly assassin!"

The brigands stared at each other in wonder. What manner of man was this to make so daring an offer?

"Oh, no!" exclaimed the outlaw chief, with a shake of the head. "It is not my game to give you any chance for your life, or expose some of my men to certain death. I saw you fight the three men in front your ranch, and I know how expert you are with your weapons."

"No, no, Ranch King, there is no escape for you! I have condemned you to death and you will be executed!"

"One boon only will I grant you; I will not strangle you to death with a rope, like a dog, as is your cursed North American fashion, but you shall be shot and die like a soldier!"

"You are a coward, Bernal, at heart, for all your dash and bravado, or you would give me a chance for my life!" the Ranch King exclaimed, contemptuously.

"Talk away! Words are the only weapons that you will ever use again!" the brigand chief retorted.

"If words would wound, you would not dare to let me use them!"

"I am going to give you the honor of being shot by my own hand," Bernal remarked. "I am a pretty good marksman and I think five or six balls will finish you. Go fifty paces, turn

and face me, if you dare, and I will give you your death!"

By this time all the brigands were on their feet, clustered just in front of the fire, in a little group; a yard from them, standing also in front of the fire, which was now at its height, roaring away amid the big sticks, stood Bernal and the two conspirators.

"Oh, you need not fear but that I will face you! I have looked death in the eyes too often to be afraid to face him now."

"All right! go ahead and we will see if you can make your boast good!" cried the outlaw chief, tauntingly.

Talbot started with steady steps.

He felt that he was walking to his death, for no way of escape seemed open to him.

He had been searched, and all his weapons removed. His arms were securely bound, and yet for all that he had made up his mind to make a desperate dash for life.

He was proceeding toward the sentinel at the lower end of the vale who was watching the scene with great interest.

The Ranch King had resolved when he had covered forty paces to make a sudden rush toward the sentinel, hoping that he might, by a superhuman effort, break the cords around his wrists.

If he could not, death would not be any more terrible, reaching him after the attempt.

Thirty paces he went, with regular, soldier-like steps, and then there was a surprise that none of the actors in the scene anticipated.

All were grouped in front of the fire, which was only a dozen feet from the brush-pile by the house.

From behind the heap of pine boughs appeared a dark form; one single motion of a muscular arm, and a paper package, containing nearly a pound of powder, was tossed into the middle of the flames.

The brigands heard the swish of the package through the air, and turned in alarm; around the back of the hut darted the intruder.

And then came a terrific explosion, hurling the burning logs in all directions.

Not a man of them standing by the fire but what was prostrated by the terrible shock, and half of them were either killed outright or badly wounded by the flying fragments of the fire! It was just as though a shell had exploded.

The man who had come thus timely to the rescue was the red chief, Mud Turtle.

The hut protected him from the explosion, and a moment afterward he raced from behind it at a wonderful rate of speed toward Talbot, a knife in his right hand—a revolver in the left.

The Ranch King had turned at the sound of the explosion, and, perceiving Mud Turtle, understood what had happened.

He hastened to meet the chief.

A single slash of the knife and Talbot was free!

He grasped a revolver tendered by the Indian, and then the two boldly charged the brigands.

The outlaws who were not disabled by the shock did not wait to give battle, but fled in terror, making their escape over the bridge at the upper end of the vale.

The sentinel fired a single shot and then fled down the valley as fast as his legs could carry him.

The fight was won!

Again the Ranch King had triumphed.

Bernal, the brigand, and the two conspirators were cold in death.

All three had been instantly killed by the flying logs.

The secret of Mud Turtle's absence was explained.

He had tracked the plotters to the brigand's cave, and managed, by circling around, to enter the vale at the upper end; amid the pine boughs he had found concealment until opportunity offered for him to deal a deadly blow.

Reader, our tale is told.

The death of the Ranch King's persistent foes ended his troubles; no more had he to be constantly on guard—Talbot in Arms—lest a secret enemy strike him unawares.

Before him was peace and rest, "a consummation devoutly to be wished," after the stirring life he had led.

Joy then to bold Dick Talbot, Arivaca's Ranch King, and so we leave him.

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